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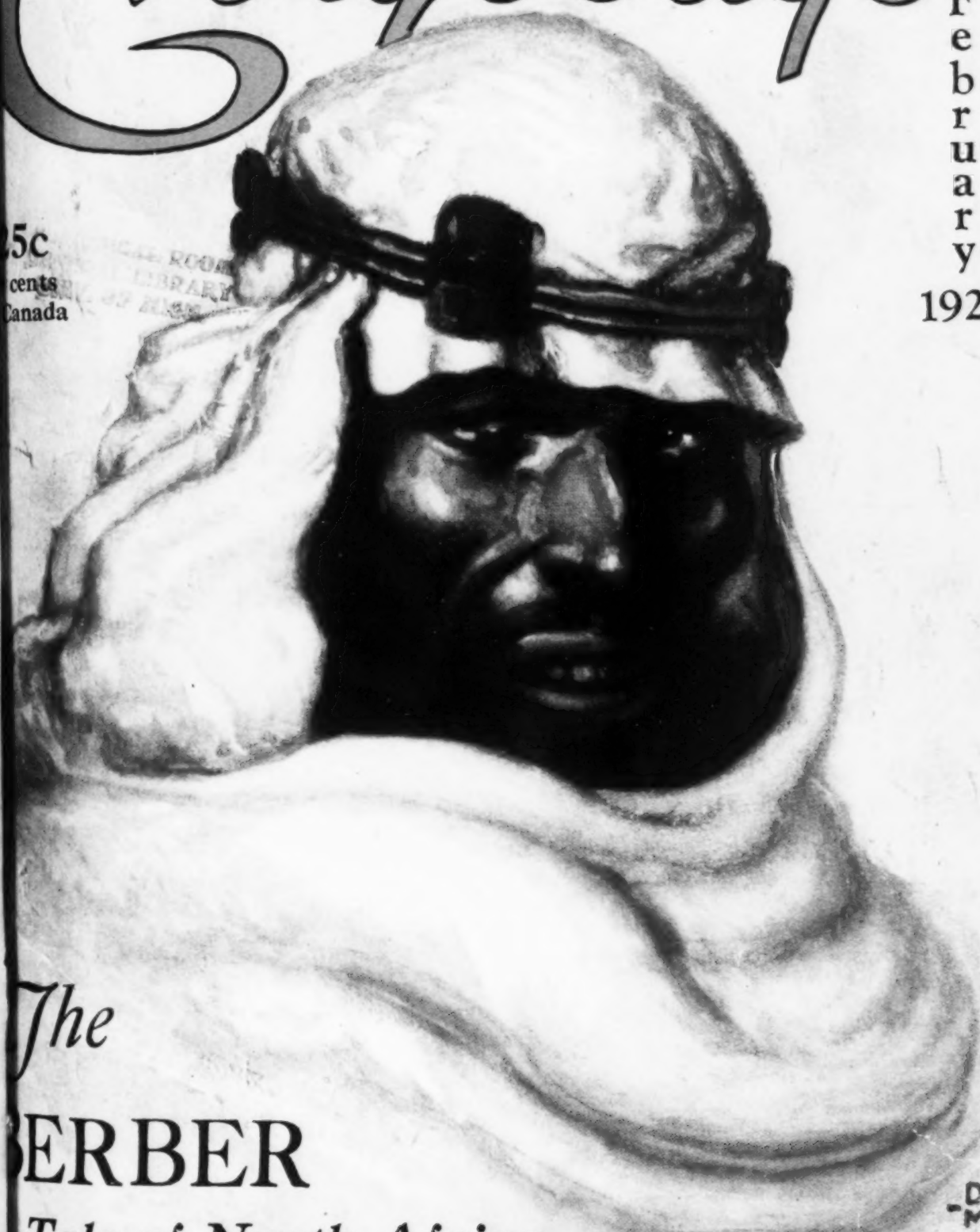
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The
BERBER

Tale of North Africa
by Georges Surdez

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Violets blue—
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digestion. A lasting,
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gives prolonged enjoyment.

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J-5

February, 1929

Vol. LX No. 2

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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The BERBER

by Georges Surdez

A TROOP of horsemen trotted slowly across the plain. The northern horizon was barred by the rugged profile of a range of hills. The slopes formed a wall of shadow, iron black. The crest gleamed with steely reflections, fringed by the crimson of lingering rays, like a jagged sword blade slashing against the luminous Algerian sky.

Southward, the Plateau of Dahar hollered endlessly, studded with runted shrubs, strewn with dark boulders, already hinting of the Saharan desolation.

The riders were sixteen in number. Fourteen of them wore the picturesque, garish uniform of the Spahis, splendid scarlet cloaks draped over loose trousers and red tunic, great white turbans wound with cordelets. One of the two in lead was an Arab in snowy white. The other, tall and lean in a well worn khaki uniform, was the French lieutenant in charge.

His face was tanned; the resolute, keen features enlivened by blue eyes. A short cropped blond mustache stood out, almost white against the gaunt, bronzed cheeks. Jacques de Gerval was twenty-six, had been in North Africa five years, since his graduation from military school.

The Arab riding at his side, Amar ben

Amar, was a trader from Mecharia, one of the northern cities. Perhaps thirty-four, his body was fleshy, his face round and flabby, yellowish in the thin fringe of black beard. Obviously, he was ill at ease among armed men, made nervous by the martial rattle of stirrups and carbine plates.

The little detachment had left Bir-Dahar that morning and come thirty miles since dawn at the same even, easy pace. Many times in the past two years, De Gerval had covered the same stretch of ground to gain the caravan route crossing from east to west, where the caravans swung north to avoid the French post at Bir-Dahar.

Before the arrival of the French in the South Oranese Territories Bir-Dahar had been nothing more than any other similar well in the region—scrubby date palms, sand, dust, heat and swarming flies. The spot had not changed much since, save for the erection of a blockhouse surrounded by a high defensive wall enclosing the residences.

Taxes and legal formalities follow the tricolor, as they follow the flag of any civilized power in primitive lands. Part of the commander's duty was to inspect, as often as possible, the papers of passing camel convoys.

A Novelette of Algiers, Concerning an Affair of Love and Death—and the Strange Code of Men of the Sword



This time, however, De Gerval had more important business. If things went as he planned, he was to have an opportunity to capture a famous Berber raider, Lakhdar ben Lardaf. The raider would not be with the caravan he hoped to intercept but planned to join it a few hours later. De Gerval was acting on information brought him by Amar ben Amar. He glanced about, then shrugged, and turned to his guide, lifting his hand to order a halt.

"Amar, it is near sunset and the caravan is not in sight."

"It will come, Lieutenant. No doubt it halted during the heat of the afternoon to start afresh at the first cool wind."

"I hope I was not brought here on a fool's errand," De Gerval added. His voice was gentle, his smile kindly. But he looked at the informer with some scorn.

"Lakhdar ben Lardaf will come, Lieutenant," Amar insisted confidently.

De Gerval nodded, then moved forward until he was boot to boot with one of the Spahis. At first glance this man was not distinguishable from the Arab and Berber troopers. Nearer, a square, honest face showed under the turban, unmistakably that of a Frenchman. Sergeant Martin was two years older than his chief, sterner,

thicker in build, a solid man with solid common sense. De Gerval and he had lived together, eaten at the same table, for twenty-four months. Difference in rank and upbringing counted for little compared with dangers and solitudes shared in common.

"What do you think of it, Martin?"

"Of course, Lieutenant, this bird, Amar ben Amar, is a slob. Anybody who'll sell a man of his own race and religion, take money for information, is a slob. But I think he's telling the truth."

"I still feel that this woman business sounds queer."

"No," Martin said placidly. "Those guys are odd that way, Lieutenant. They'll treat some women like dogs. Then they'll fall in love with another one and lose their heads."

"You think Lakhdar would risk his neck for a woman?"

"Wouldn't you, Lieutenant?"

"That would depend on the woman, Martin," De Gerval laughed.

"Guess that's the answer," Martin concluded.

He lifted his hand, called his chief's attention to a tawny cloud crawling forward on the plain, far east. Through the

haze of dust gleamed metal, reflections of the sun on gun barrels.

"The caravan——"

"Dismount," De Gerval ordered.

While the Spahis were fastening the horses, he unstrapped a cloak from behind his saddle, tossed it to Amar.

"Hide thyself in this," he said in Arabic. "Remain aside while I converse with the headman. In case the man we seek has already joined them he will think thee a Spahi."

Amar obeyed and stood aside. A strange fellow, the trader, yet he had come with a convincing story and himself was officially approved by the French resident in Mecharia. He had come south, so he said, to avenge his family's honor on the person of Lakhdar ben Lardaf, and was one of the most timid avengers the lieutenant had ever beheld.

Of course, Lakhdar ben Lardaf's reputation warranted this to some extent.

According to the Arab Bureaux, which forms the secret service of France in North Africa, Lakhdar had been born in one of the Berber encampments twenty-four years ago. From his sixteenth year he had followed raiding expeditions. His father and two of his uncles had been killed by the French Camel Corps.

In spite of his youth and lack of experience—eight years do not count for much in the career of a raider—Lakhdar was now a chieftain. He commanded a band of gaunt land pirates, flat bellied pillagers, varying in number between fifty and one hundred men, according to recent successes or failures. He had emerged victorious from two encounters with the Meharistes; victorious in the sense that he had managed to extricate his band with booty intact. As the Meharistes' rank and file are recruited among desert men, commanded by crack French officers selected from the most daring in other units, this was no small accomplishment.

Like all post commanders on the Saharan border, De Gerval had received official instructions to pay particular attention to Lakhdar. He knew that his capture would mean credit and promotion. But to outwit a born raider is a task for the most experienced officer in the service. It is difficult to cope with the invisible. Raiders are visible only for brief moments to the troops charged with police duty in

the dunes, the few minutes that the skirmishes last.

Amar ben Amar had arrived at Bir-Dahar with credentials from French officials and the *kaid* of his own tribe. He told his odd tale to De Gerval——

IN MECHARIA, Amar, three months previously, became acquainted with a native called Bechir. Their friendship grew swiftly. There was even talk of marriage between Bechir and Amar's sister, Mabrouka. But Amar was not altogether blinded by friendship. Bechir was vague in his explanations of the past, of his business, although he spent recklessly, denied himself neither comforts nor luxuries.

One day, by accident, Amar saw his friend stripped to the waist. Bechir claimed to be a man of peace. His torso was seamed with scars. Amar investigated, bided his time and eventually came to the conclusion that Bechir was none other than Lakhdar ben Lardaf, come north for one of his well known sprees. Amar, wishing no man for a friend who was a foe of France, invited Lakhdar to a last joyous evening. There was eating and drinking, music and dancing girls, in a house rented for the occasion. The French police were warned. Lakhdar, well fed, seemingly sleepy, watched the steps of an Ouled-Nail dancer, unaware, apparently, of the sound of footsteps, the clicking of steel as the soldiers took place at the exits.

Amar ben Amar was satisfied, having done his duty. Then, brusksly, a few minutes before he was to give the signal for a concerted rush into the house, Lakhdar reached out calmly, closed long fingers around his throat. The city dweller was no match for the raider.

When Amar recovered, Lakhdar was nowhere to be found. The soldiers entered, searched the house, the gardens and neighboring structures, vainly. Amar returned to his father's home, fearful that he would not reach it alive, wondering why he had been thus far spared, for the vengeful nature of the Berber was known.

His father, shaken and nervous, informed him that there had been a commotion in the women's quarters. A friend of the family, there for the evening rushed forward pistol in hand. The old man, following as fast as his aged limbs could carry

him, found him dead, on the stairs leading to the harem, killed by a single knife thrust.

The bewildered women could only say that a tall man had entered, beaten off the guards who tried to halt him, and carried off Mabrouka. Patrols were launched in all directions; groups of men with fixed bayonets, gendarmes and native infantry. But Lakhdar had made his escape to the open *bled*.

Amar had connections throughout North Africa and discovered traces of the fugitive. Pressed for time the Berber had trusted Mabrouka to friends in a small village of the hills north of Fahra, and had gone south to join his men. Amar had ascertained that Mabrouka would be sent with the caravan of Mohammed el Kettabi, that the raider would meet the caravan and claim her at the stopping place nearest Bir-Dahar.

Besides a legitimate desire to free his sister, Amar ben Amar was honor bound to avenge the friend slain in his home. He explained to De Gerval. If he failed to kill Lakhdar with his own hand, or at least to contribute to his death, he would be dishonored. He added that he was a law abiding man, had little love for the ancient, primitive customs of his race and was glad to have recourse to soldiers, professional killers. In a way, he hoped that Lakhdar might not be slain immediately, but taken north for trial—with only one possible issue: conviction of murder and execution by the guillotine.

Knowing natives, De Gerval had found his vindictiveness natural. But he was shocked by the interest shown by Amar in the amount of the reward offered by the Government for the raider's capture. A wealthy man, such as Amar, should not have considered two hundred *douros*.

THE caravan approached. Sixty camels at most; great uncouth beasts, lurching patiently onward, setting their hoofs down with absurd daintiness into the sand. Skinny, sunburnt men, in short *jellabas*, carrying clubs, walked beside them, encouraged them with a monotonous, droning chant. Asses followed; some laden with enormous packs, others carrying old men or women. There were a dozen guards, mounted on skinny horses, bearded, tanned, at ease in the high sad-

dles, long barreled flintlocks hung on the strap from the pommel.

Mohammed el Kettabi was known to De Gerval. He halted his horse near the lieutenant and dismounted with the assistance of his followers, who rushed forward to hold his stirrup and offer their shoulders for support. His face was wrinkled and seamed by twenty years exposure in the Sahara, his beard yellow. Only in the restless glance could De Gerval discern his annoyance at thus unexpectedly meeting the French.

"Greetings, Lieutenant. All well with thee?"

"All well, Si Mohammed. Why didst thou not stop at the post for inspection?"

"It is off my path. My papers are in order."

De Gerval scanned the documents, stamped by officials of the French Government. The caravan was bound for the nearest oasis of the Saoura District, then down to Taoudeni, halfway across the Sahara to pick up cargo for the return trip from the Timbuktou caravans, come there for salt.

The lieutenant asked a few questions, perfunctorily. He was not at this time interested in the smuggling of a few bales of goods. His real purpose was to give plausible reason for his presence in the vicinity.

"Thy papers are in order, Si Mohammed. Thou wilt camp not far from here to-night?"

Mohammed was in excellent humor. The inspection had not been severe. De Gerval knew he had much feared delay and trouble due to the presence on his camels of undeclared goods.

"We camp an hour's march away, Lieutenant. At the little well——"

"There is only water enough there for your beasts and a small provision to carry away. My men would take water of more use to thee. Hence, I shall stay here for the night, to rest for the long trip back to the post tomorrow."

"My tent is thine," Mohammed said courteously.

"Perhaps I shall come to visit thee to-night," De Gerval said. "Or in the morning to bid thee farewell."

Again, their hands touched. The camels lunched by slowly, the guards exchanged a few words with the Spahis who had

drawn forward. As De Gerval watched the caravan march by he wondered which of the veiled figures was Mabrouka, the woman loved of Lakhdar, for whom he had killed a man and risked capture. The long procession ebbed in the shimmering dust.

De Gerval beckoned to Amar.

"Was she there?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Thou art certain?"

"I know my sister, Lieutenant."

"I watched closely," De Gerval resumed, "and no movement of alarm was made by any woman. If she were there she would know that I would help her. She saw the soldiers with me."

"Fear prevented her from speaking, Lieutenant. Someone may be guarding her. A bullet is soon fired. Then flight." Amar indicated the darkening plain, the hills. "Out there, a well mounted man can find safety. How can twenty slay one, if they cannot find him?"

"Granted." De Gerval turned to Martin who had drawn near. "I told the old man I might pay him a friendly visit. Hence, when he hears the hoofbeats tonight, he will reassure whoever is with him that I merely come to bid him farewell. Lakhdar, if he is there, will have no reason to suspect we come for him and will remain quiet rather than attract attention by flight. We'll wait until eight-thirty or nine. They'll have eaten by then and be comfortably settled for the night. You will take six men and circle the camp near the well, quietly. If anyone tries to get out of camp at my approach, shoot. This is no time for caution. Two men will remain with the horses left here. As for me, I'll start an hour or so after you, with five men and Amar and ride openly toward the encampment. If Lakhdar is there, Amar can point him out to me. I'll arrest him and whistle. You close in then. Understood?"

"Perfectly, Lieutenant."

"I had better not show myself," Amar, who had followed the conversation in French, protested. "Should he see me, he will know our errand. I shall be the first mark."

"But I must know him without chance of mistake, Amar."

"He is easily recognized. He is tall, his beard——"

"Be still," De Gerval snapped impatiently. "Thy hide is no more precious than ours. With the cloak thou art not easily recognized."

Amar hesitated, coughed.

"Lieutenant, the reward shall be paid immediately after the man is caught?"

"As soon as we reach the post, yes," De Gerval promised.

Fires were built. Soon after night had fallen the two Frenchmen had their meager dinner together, smoked and drank coffee. In the distance a coppery gleam against the sky marked the camp of the caravan.

DE GERVAL and his small escort reached Mohammed's camp between nine and ten. They were challenged several times by sentries, tall, hooded silhouettes rising brusquely out of the gloom before the horses, the sharp, glistening line of a long gun barrel. Even so near the protection of the French troops the caravan guarded itself well. De Gerval answered, was recognized. Evidently the chief had spoken of the possible visit.

The weather was fine. No tents had been erected. The evening meal was finished and the last prayer had long ago been called. Groups were formed around the fires of dried roots, conversing in low voices, or listening to music. One or two drums rumbled softly, the thin notes of the cameleer's flute, the *jusk*, lifted. The men formed a happy, jovial crowd. Belts had been loosened, hoods lowered, turbans unrolled. Under gleaming shaved skulls, coarse swarthy faces grinned, teeth flashing in black beards in the glare of the fires. Near by the weapons: long rifles, with the batteries wrapped in greased cloth, and sabers. Each man carried a knife passed through the sash, and not a few had long barreled Riffi pistols.

"*Sa-laam, ouled!*" the lieutenant greeted.

"*Sa-laam, Khallif!*"

"Where is Si Mohammed?" De Gerval asked, reining his horse near one of the fires.

A man rose and indicated the direction with a gesture.

De Gerval dismounted. The Spahis followed suit.

In a cleared space, the exact center of the camp, a great fire was blazing, fed by a negro slave. Mohammed was seated

with several men, each resembling the other, identical white beard, wrinkled faces and shrewd, unblinking black eyes. They were his lieutenants, the *bechamars*. Mohammed rose, came forward.

"Thou hast come, praise Allah!"

As a matter of fact, De Gerval knew that he was far from welcome and admired the old chap's calm acceptance of the situation. Room was made for the newcomer. Amar and the Spahis were assigned other places, near the end of the semicircular line around the bush fire. A glass of boiling tea was offered the lieutenant; the stem of a water pipe disposed invitingly.

After an exchange of polite banalities De Gerval glanced in Amar's direction, noted an almost imperceptible nod, saw the trader's hand outspread on one knee. Four fingers of the right hand—therefore he counted four places on his right.

A young man was seated there, apparently in quiet conversation with one of the *bechamars*. Like many others, he had discarded turban and cloak. His skull was covered with a pointed red cap, tasseled in blue silk. He smoked a pipe, the bowl hooded with perforated brass. His arms and legs, long and muscular, were bare, tanned, like those of an ordinary camel driver. His long face was further lengthened by a crisp, square cut black beard. His lips were thin, firm; his teeth, when he smiled, very white. In the sash molding his slim waist appeared the butt of a modern revolver, the metallic handles of two knives. In addition to this already imposing armament, he carried a sheathed blade strapped against his left forearm, in the fashion of the Tuareg. Dangling on his chest, hung from leather cords, were several little bags of red leather amulets.

De Gerval laid his hand on Mohammed's arm lightly.

"That man over there, the fourth on the right . . . Do not seem to look, for if there is trouble in this camp thou shalt be held responsible, and can come no more into French Territory for trade, lest prison be assigned thee . . . Who is he?"

"One of the camel men, Lieutenant."

"That lie is forgiven, for it is thy duty to protect thy guest who came in the name of Allah. Promise only that thy men shall not interfere with what will come."

"I promise, Lieutenant," Mohammed

said philosophically. "Wolves can protect themselves."

"Are there more with him?"

"Four men."

De Gerval lighted a cigaret from a coal picked from the fire. Then, quietly, he unloosed the hook of his revolver holster, ascertained that the weapon would slide out easily. For many seconds now the others had sensed that something unusual was about to occur. Silence had come over the entire camp. Everywhere the officer could see faces turned toward him, calm, yet alert.

He rose. The young man he had noticed rose at the same time, smiling. With the left hand, which held the cigaret, De Gerval indicated him to the Spahis.

"That is the man we seek."

Four carbines were leveled toward the Berber. At the same time De Gerval's hand came into view, holding his revolver. He walked toward Lakhdar ben Lardaf, with an answering smile.

"Greetings, Lakhdar!"

"Greetings, Christian!"

De Gerval kept an eye on the raider's hands. The right still held the pipe, the other hung limply at his side. Upon a nod from the officer, one of the Spahis stepped forward, took the weapons one by one, unstrapped the sheath on the forearm.

"Thou dost see," Lakhdar pointed out quietly, "that resistance here would cause bystanders to be slain. I came as Mohammed's guest and I swore no harm would befall him for doing me a favor."

"Those who know thee will also know it was not fear that made thee submit quietly," De Gerval approved. "Where are thy men?"

"They fled when thy soldiers first appeared."

"They will not go far, Lakhdar. I have other men outside."

One of the Spahis bound his wrists with leather straps, fastening them cunningly so that even a Berber could not slip out of their grip.

Lakhdar glanced toward Amar ben Amar, appeared to recognize him for the first time. He spat on the ground.

"It was that dog who sold me?" he asked.

"It was he."

"The second time," Lakhdar said mus-

ingly. "I should have shown no mercy the first time. Allah punishes me for being a fool. A dead dog does not bark nor bite."

THOSE present within the camp had gathered around, silent, staring at the two principal actors of the little tragedy. It was understood that the French lieutenant had not taken Lakhdar to do him a favor. Lakhdar would be executed. This scene would be worth recounting around the campfires, the final chapter of a famous raider's life.

"I was there when Lakhdar ben Lardaf, the Berber, was taken by the Bir-Dahar lieutenant," they would say.

Lakhdar and De Gerval, aware of their rôles, endeavored to conduct themselves with dignity. One could not cringe, the other could not gloat. One fights, wins and escapes; one fights, loses and bows to the will of Allah.

Then suddenly the sharp slap of carbines in the night air resounded. Some distance away, shouts and the sounds of pursuit. The companions of Lakhdar, crawling away in the darkness, had clashed with Martin's Spahis.

Martin arrived a few minutes later, with his men. Two carried a limp body, which they dropped near by, casually. Two others were holding up a wounded man between them.

"Got these, Lieutenant. I think there were more, but they sneaked by. Dark as pitch outside. You wouldn't believe it." The sergeant was very tense, excited. He looked toward Lakhdar, who was speaking to Mohammed, half turned away. "Is that the bird?"

"Yes."

"Good work, Lieutenant. I'll look at this fellow."

The wounded man was brought nearer the light, his *jellaba* lifted. He had been shot in the abdomen and through the lungs. Bright blood seeped from the tiny, dark holes onto the brown flesh. When the sergeant touched him, he lost consciousness and moaned.

"Gone, I guess," De Gerval commented.

"Even these birds aren't made of iron," Martin commented. "Wouldn't stop when we called. The other got it through the back of the skull."

The men crowded around. Weapons, blood, eager faces. De Gerval recalled a

similar scene from the past. A vacation on the Swiss-French border; a farmhouse yard. On the cobbles near the dunghill an outstretched body, toward which strained eager, startled faces. Two men in uniforms standing near. A smuggler and two customs guards. The gulf between races was not as wide as one might believe.

Lakhdar was speaking to Mohammed.

"For the one whom you know about, deliver her to whatever men of my tribe thou mayest find further south. They will see that she reaches my home, and, Allah alone knows, I may join her some day."

"True, there is Mabrouka," De Gerval thought. He beckoned to Amar. "Here, thou! Seek thy sister."

Amar moved away, elbowed through the crowd, designated a girl of small stature. De Gerval could see only the shapeliness of the brows, the roots of a dainty nose and two long, dark eyes, startled, beautiful. To employ the Arab term: "As twin wells of night in which stars gleam."

"Come here, Mabrouka ben Amar," De Gerval called.

The girl was pushed forward by willing hands. The jostling caused the white garment on her shoulders to slip aside, and the Frenchman had a glimpse of very white skin, delicately veined with blue. Then a small hand flashed up; in a glint of gold bracelets slim fingers readjusted the folds. The frightened eyes glanced first into De Gerval's, then toward Lakhdar, then again to the lieutenant.

"I am here, my lord."

"This man is thy brother?"

"He is my brother."

"And that other one—" De Gerval indicated Lakhdar—"is he the one who took thee from thy father's house?"

"He is the man."

"He concealed thee in a village and ordered thee to come to join him with the caravan of Mohammed el Kettabi?"

"He did, my lord."

"Thou art safe now. Thy brother will take charge of thee."

"Ask of her," Lakhdar urged, "whether she desires to go with her brother or to my people, Lieutenant."

"Thy desire is mine," Mabrouka said, before the lieutenant could put the question.

"Lieutenant," Amar interrupted, "don't

thou not see that she fears him? She will do as he orders. Our women are thus—when they fear.”

De Gerval hesitated.

“How old is Mabrouka?” he asked.

“Sixteen, Lieutenant,” Amar declared. “She was born the year the grasshoppers ate the crops.”

“According to our law, then, she is still under her father’s authority. Amar ben Amar represents his father here. She goes with him. If she has any protest to make on this, let her appeal to the tribunal in Mecharia. Bring horses.”

Martin had finished dressing the man’s wounds.

“Lieutenant, what shall we do with this fellow? We can’t leave him here. The caravan moves on in the morning.”

“Rig up some sort of a *cacolet* on a horse and bring him along, Martin. Hell!” he swore, adding in a lower voice: “Martin, you act like a woman. Haven’t you seen a wounded man before?”

Martin shrugged, gestured for two of his men to take the wounded man aside, while a sort of pannier was being hastily made.

Lakhdar’s horse was led forward and De Gerval ordered him to mount. Cords were passed under the animal’s belly to fasten the Berber’s ankles together. Other ropes were passed through the leather thongs binding his arms, fastened to the pommel of the saddle. This appeared a luxury of precaution, but if Lakhdar escaped after having been in his power De Gerval would have a difficult explanation to make to his superiors.

The Spahis who had remained to guard the horses arrived. They had heard the firing and knew that the episode was over, in one way or another. Mohammed willingly gave up the mounts of the four Berbers who had escorted Lakhdar to his camp, abandoned by them in the haste of flight.

One was offered to Mabrouka, and she mounted easily, like a man, without effort, her clothes hitched high on her legs. De Gerval shortened the stirrups, placed them within reach of her small sandaled feet. He smiled faintly. In spite of her recent fright and bewilderment the time would come when she would recall the episode with pleasure. For girls grow into women and women like to recall having been de-

sired by young men. He wondered if it would not have been preferable for her to be the bride of a desert raider rather than a prisoner in a trader’s harem.

“Thy troubles are ended,” he said, looking up.

“I fear nothing,” she replied. Above the veil, her eyes were hard and resolute. True, she was of Amar ben Amar’s blood and would become fearless when safe!

“Go ahead,” De Gerval ordered Martin. He followed his detachment on foot, holding the bridle of his horse. Mohammed strode beside him until they reached the limit of the camp.

“Mohammed el Kettabi, I know well that there are goods on thy camels which were not declared. I forgive thee this time, as I have been lucky in other ways.”

“Taxes to the French, bribes to the raiders—where can one make profit, unless Allah is willing?” Mohammed retorted, smiling. He indicated Lakhdar. “Unless he is watched well he will be gone by morning, Lieutenant.”

“Thou dost warn me, yet he is thy friend?”

“My friend?” Mohammed gestured wide. “Many times he has halted my caravans, asked one camel in five, pack and all, for his share. I knew that he would get the whole if he risked his men’s lives and fought, so I paid. But, by Allah, I was angered. Even the strongest lion is sometime shot by the hunter, however. Peace go with thee, Lieutenant!”

“With thee also, Mohammed!”

De Gerval mounted and caught up with the detachment. Martin rode beside the horse carrying the Berber who had been wounded. Then came a knot of riders, surrounding Lakhdar. Ahead were Mabrouka and Amar. Brother and sister were silent.

They traveled all night. When dawn came, the walls of Bir-Dahar were still a mile distant in the rosy mist. A few minutes later the *tirailleur* sentry before the gate presented arms. The sergeant left in charge reported all in order within the post.

Martin took the wounded man to the hospital established in a hut near the structures containing stores. De Gerval led Lakhdar to the prison, a small cell lit by a single small window, barred with thick iron rods, closed by a wooden door rein-

forced with steel. At the bottom of the sloping plank used as a bed were several sets of leg irons, for unruly inmates.

"Lie down," De Gerval ordered.

With his own hands he adjusted the irons, locked them around the Berber's thin ankles. He was cautious but not inhuman. He left behind a package of his own tobacco and ordered food and drink for the prisoner. Then he sought his quarters, went to bed, worn out by nearly twenty hours in the saddle.

AT NOON his orderly awoke him. He dressed leisurely, contemplating without pleasure the necessity of making out a full report of the capture.

Bir-Dahar was presumed to be connected with the outside world by telegraph. The credits had been voted years ago, plans made and materials purchased. An operator had been stationed at the post. But, with the typical energy shown by some branches of the Administration, nothing had yet been done. Since the end of hostilities in the region, the relaying stations for heliograph had been discontinued. De Gerval could depend only on couriers for communication.

Martin, as ranking noncommissioned officer, took his meals with De Gerval. He greeted his chief casually when he came into the dining room—a small, square apartment, furnished with chairs and tables knocked together from the planks of packing-cases. Martin absorbed the usual *aperitif* without relish, showed less appetite than usual.

"Is the mutton tough?" De Gerval asked.

"No, Lieutenant."

"What are you making such a mug about then?"

"Nothing, Lieutenant."

"No?" De Gerval changed the conversation. "I want a man to go north this afternoon, or tomorrow morning at the latest, with my report. You select him, see that he has a good horse."

"Understood, Lieutenant."

They finished the meal in silence. The orderly brought the coffee. Martin accepted a smoke, sipped his coffee, but his efforts to keep up an amiable conversation were unsuccessful. His heavy face scowled, his eyes were brooding. De Gerval knew he was worried.

Martin was a fine man. Born in the

slums of a large city, he had faced the world alone at the age most children don pants. Enlisted at eighteen, the Army was his real family. His patience, keen wit and courage were proverbial in the Spahis. Likewise, and in spite of his bitter childhood, his gayety of spirit. When Martin sulked he usually had good reason. He puffed at his cigaret, crushed it before it was one-third consumed, against all his economical habits. He waved aside the orderly who was about to refill his cup.

"I've to go out and see about one of the horses, Lieutenant," he said, and picked up his *kepi* from a chair.

"Just a minute," De Gerval put in.

"Lieutenant?"

"Sit down. Light another cigaret. Have another cup of coffee." He stilled the sergeant's first movement of protest. "Orders!"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"You've got a grouch, Martin. I want to know what's the matter."

"Nothing, Lieutenant."

"That's twice you've said that. Now, tell me."

"Nothing you could help, Lieutenant."

"Private worries?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Yet there's been no mail for a week. And you've told me a dozen times you have no one in France you care about. In any case, if you need money——"

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Martin looked at his chief with evident surprise and real gratitude. "But money wouldn't help me."

"You're the first of the kind I've met," De Gerval said smiling. "Look here, you fool, it's something connected with a question of service. You know I'm not unreasonable. I hate to see you in this state."

"I can't tell you, Lieutenant."

"All right. You're gloomy without reason. You know what that means out here. I'll slate you for transfer before you go crazy on my hands."

The threat had the expected result. Martin had organized his life at Bir-Dahar to his satisfaction. The habits of a veteran Spahi noncom are as set and precious to him as those of an old maid. Moreover, the sergeant knew he would lose much of his independence in a larger unit, with several officers and many equals. A ser-

geant in a garrison town is a subaltern, in an outpost he is a friend.

"Please don't do that, Lieutenant," he pleaded. "I'll tell you—I promise to tell you as soon as—Lakhdar ben Lardaf is gone."

"I'll have to wait for orders in that case. He needs more men for escort than I can spare from here. But what has he got to do with you? Afraid he'll escape?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," Martin said, without looking up. "I'm afraid he'll escape."

"What an old woman you are!" the lieutenant laughed. "I tell you what I'll do. I forbid you to have anything to do with the guard of the prisoner. I hereby inform you that I alone am responsible. If he beats it, you can't be blamed. That's settled."

De Gerval followed Martin with his glance until he was out of sight. In a way, he understood the sergeant's perturbation. Lakhdar was an important prisoner, and the man who lost him would be severely reprimanded. But he could not recognize this with Martin's usual matter of fact acceptance of his duties.

THE lieutenant went to the office, an oblong room facing on a low roofed veranda supported on palm trunks. He sought the shadiest corner, away from the thin rays of sunlight stabbing through the slats of the wooden blinds. Flies buzzed heavily in the semiobscurity. Odors drifted from the stables with the breeze, mingled with the scent of warm sand.

De Gerval picked up the pen, added ink from the big bottle to the thick stuff in the bottom of the glass container, piled white paper before him. Then he found his palms and fingers moist with perspiration, the lines blotted, nothing went right. He had a pleasant topic to handle, the chance to make out a good report, and was annoyed by material difficulties at every turn. He dried his hands, smoked, whistled, wrote a few words and halted.

"Orderly."

The Spahi on duty outside came in, slowly. Too slowly to suit De Gerval, who corrected his position, reminded him of his strict duties, scolded him for napping on the veranda when he was presumed to be awake. In fact, he knew he was at the start of a nervous afternoon.

"Get me Sergeant Dukers, at once," he

finished. "Tell him to come immediately!"

Dukers, a tall, skinny young fellow, arrived, sweating and red. Probably the Spahi had warned him, for he quieted down at the door, stepped in with a soldierly tread, saluted impeccably.

"Dukers—" De Gerval paused, felt a sudden shame for his causeless irritation. It was hot for others as well as himself, and he must not fall into the easy pastime of venting his discomfort on his inferiors. "I wanted to see you about the prisoner. The sentry I ordered placed near his cell will be relieved every two hours. He has been fed?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. And he's a fussy chap. Asked me to make sure there was no pork in that stew."

"Matter of religion."

"Sure." Dukers grinned. "Then he ate the biscuits, in which the cook puts lard. Seemed to like them, so I didn't spoil his meal."

"Slight sin," De Gerval admitted. "Have a look at him every so often. Make sure he's safe. You know those birds—"

"Ooze through keyholes, Lieutenant. I'll watch him."

"Dismissed."

Again he picked up the pen, musing:

"Let's see. Report to go direct to Headquarters. Copy to be sent to Regimental Headquarters from there. Copy for civil authorities to be made there, too. May need identification signed by Amar ben Amar. Maybe, by Mademoiselle Mabrouka, who fears nothing."

The pen creaked for a few seconds.

Lieutenant Jacques de Gerval, of the Seventh Spahis, commanding Post of Bir-Dahar, to Monsieur le Colonel Jerome Lehagre, Officer of the Legion of Honor, High Commissary of the South Oranese Territories, Ain Saffra.

Then his fingers drummed the table mechanically.

"What shall I say? Simple. Lakhdar ben Lardaf is in a cell here. What shall I do with him? . . . But, the devil! I want to mount this up like a diamond in its setting, so it'll scintillate and dazzle, and make obvious my great ability and unusual courage in a modest manner. The setting. All's in that, little Jacques. The difference between a nod of approval and promotion. There's a stripe, if I can make it foam up a bit. Casualties on the en-

emy's side. Martin's job must be presented neatly, too."

For some time he stared at the paper, agitating similar thoughts. Then he became aware that Dukers had again entered the room.

"Yes, Dukers?"

"I looked in at the prisoner a few minutes ago. And he says he wants to speak with you."

"What about?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant."

"All right," De Gerval agreed, after a moment's thought. "Unlock his irons and bring him here under escort. Not as safe, but more dignified. And, by the way, search him once more, to make sure."

Lakhdar entered a few minutes later, the center of a group of four Spahis, preceded by Dukers. He was clad in the same brown *jellaba* but his head was bare. The lock of hair, by which the Angel of Death was to draw him to Paradise, as he does with all good Moslems, stood out startlingly on the smooth skull. The forearms, sheaths of muscles and bone in a tight envelope of tanned skin, were fastened together with leather straps.

"What dost thou desire, Lakhdar?"

"Merely a few words with thee, Lieutenant. Alone."

De Gerval looked at his prisoner steadily; then, unwilling to admit uneasiness when surrounded by the walls of his own post and fifty armed men, he nodded.

"Dukers, a sentry under the window. Shut the door and stay outside."

THE door closed and the darkness increased. De Gerval lighted a lantern. A building designed to shut out sun and heat had other disadvantages.

"Speak, Lakhdar."

"What is to be done with me, Lieutenant?"

"As soon as my chiefs are informed of thy capture they will send soldiers to take thee north."

"There are not enough here, Lieutenant?"

"What if thy men should learn where thou wilt pass and try to free thee? Twenty-five men are needed and I cannot spare them. It means a couple of weeks in a cell for thee, but that is not my will."

"And in the north, what shall be done with me?"

"Thou hast slain a man in the city. Canst deny the killing?"

"No, Lieutenant."

"Thou'lt be tried, declared guilty, condemned to death."

"I hoped I would be judged and condemned by soldiers."

"Why?"

"Because, when a tribunal condemns a man to death in a city, that man is killed with the machine that cuts necks."

"Yes, he goes to the guillotine."

"Is there no way that I can ask to be killed otherwise?"

"No. The law is the law. What business hadst thou in a city, killing a civilian? The evil comes from that."

"But I have slain soldiers before, several times," Lakhdar said hopefully. "There was the little lieutenant. He was tracking my *jish* north of Hassi-Brahim. We ambushed him, and it was my shot that dropped him."

"Lieutenant Bourgain?" De Gerval asked, his voice changed. Charles Bourgain had gone to military school with him, come to Africa for his first trip—and his last—on the same ship.

"I believe so. It was three years back, in June. And others, too."

De Gerval felt no hatred for his foes. They lived according to their code, were to be respected for fighting the people of an alien race and another religion, who, after all, won and ruled only by superior strength and organization. Border fighting was border fighting, and he who ambushed first was the one to survive. Bourgain, on that occasion, was not hunting Lakhdar and his men to do them a good turn.

Considering the known courage of Lakhdar, his calm acceptance of death after capture, the slight trace of fear in his eyes now was pathetic. Arab and Berber who will smile at the firing squad will shrink before the apparatus bearing the name of Doctor Guillotine. When the Angel of Death takes the faithful to the promised haven of Mohammed, popular belief has it that he does not bother to look closely and is apt to take the head up alone if it is separated from the body. Eternity without a body, in the Moslem heaven, would be worse than total oblivion. The slicer not only ends earthly life, but life eternal.

De Gerval himself agreed that it would

be much simpler to take the prisoner out, stand him before a convenient wall and drop him without unnecessary display.

"I'll speak of this in the report, Lakhdar. I cannot take it upon myself to kill thee. The civil authorities claim thy head."

"Nothing can be done here, then?"

"No."

"Allah wills it. That was all I wanted to say."

De Gerval summoned Dukers and the prisoner was led away.

The report shaped itself after some effort and the lieutenant wrote on for two or three hours. There were many side lights to give, the part played by Amar ben Amar, that played by Martin, and Lakhdar's demand for the firing squad. Even the brief conversation had contributed something new, the identity of the leader who had attacked and decimated Lieutenant Bourgain's detachment three years before. From such reports, with disclosures made at intervals of years, the history of South Algeria would be completed in the future.

Martin entered shortly before nightfall to make out his own papers. He was directly responsible to the squadron commander for several matters of detail, as he often acted in place of De Gerval when the latter was away on patrols. He apparently did not find his particular documents hard to compose and soon laid the pen aside. He appeared to be in a better mood, smiled when he saw his chief's eyes upon him.

"Lakhdar wanted to do you a favor, Martin," De Gerval said.

"How, Lieutenant?"

"Asked to be shot immediately and save himself the suspense. Afraid of the slicer . . ." De Gerval related his interview with the raider.

Martin grew sober again and the same look of misery slid into his glance.

"What's the matter, Martin? Ill?"

Martin the stout hearted, who had won the Military Medal in the field, rested his head in his hands, and the lieutenant saw his thick fingers quiver.

"Lieutenant," the noncom said, at last, "I wish you'd lock me up."

"Lock you up! What do you mean?"

"What I say, Lieutenant." Martin now appeared sulky. "If you don't lock me up, you may be sorry. You must under-

stand, Lieutenant, I'm not crazy. There are some things a man shouldn't do according to duty, but which he feels he may do anyway——"

"Let's get this clear, Martin." De Gerval brought his chair nearer to the table occupied by the sergeant, propped one booted heel on the edge of the rough plank. "You want to be placed in a cell; out of the possibility of doing something or other—exactly what?"

"Assist the prisoner to escape."

"Lakhdar ben Lardaf?"

"Who else?"

"Why do you want to do that? You're a good Frenchman, I hope."

"I'm wondering whether I'm a Frenchman first, or just a man." Martin laid his clenched fist on the table, spread the fingers out bruskiy. "You mentioned Lieutenant Bourgain a few minutes ago. You know I am one of the survivors of the mess in which he ended. You think you know the whole story of my escape. But you don't. Nobody on our side does. . . ."

AFTER a moment Martin went on with his story——

Fact is I left the Meharistes immediately after. Did you ever wonder why I left a camel corps unit to go back in the Spahis, when most non-coms are eager to do just the opposite? I'll tell you: The Spahis usually don't get assigned far south, except in large places like Colomb-Bechar. They stay up at about this line. And Berber raiders seldom come this way, save perhaps once or twice a year. I left the Meharistes, where I was getting along first class, because I didn't want to increase my chances of finding myself drawing a bead on a guy who had done me a good turn. It was this way:

Lieutenant Bourgain was a nice chief, kind to everybody under him. But he was rash, considered counter raiding as a sport rather than a serious occupation. He had a lot of luck at first and kidded himself into thinking it would last forever. A bunch of Berbers, mixed with a few Doui-Meni, had taken camels from one of our pastures near Hassi-Brahim. They had a boy sergeant in charge there, a chap with only six months in the region. He was killed and his head cut off.

That made our bunch pretty sore.

Bourgain, who had liked the lad, asked to command the detachment sent out. The captain granted his request. But, right in front of me, he told Bourgain to consult me if in doubt. I was an old-timer already and knew a few tricks.

We started out, about twenty-five Arab privates, the lieutenant and myself. We had been trailing the Berbers eight days when we picked up a stray camel man who gave us information. He had fled from a caravan attacked by the very fellows we were after. He said they had taken shelter, probably, in a rocky stretch miles to the northwest.

I suggested that we drop the pursuit. I had been in the place before and knew we couldn't do much. The lieutenant laughed, asked me what we were in the Sahara for if not to take chances. I shut up.

We went ahead. It was rocky ground, you can bet, that we traveled in. Huge black stone palisades glistening in the sun, gray and red boulders, all the trails narrow, winding in gullies, a regular labyrinth. If you set to work deliberately to build an ideal place for ambush, you couldn't do much better.

Lieutenant Bourgain used as much caution as he had in his system. From every point of vantage he swept the rocks for signs of the enemy. I told him that the sun shining on the lenses worked like the heliograph and warned of our coming. He said what you sometimes say, that I am an old woman.

We had been roaming in and out of ravines for a couple of days, when, early one afternoon, shots came unexpectedly. Naturally, the officer was first to drop. Fell from the saddle, seven or eight feet, and I heard his skull strike the rock. My own camel went down soon after and I guess I was knocked senseless.

When I got up all the men who were still alive had fled. I didn't blame them. It would have been foolish to stay there and try to fight. As I had not moved, they thought me dead. All that I learned later. They were new men and didn't try to take our bodies back as veterans would have done.

My first thought was that the natives would be coming down soon to loot the corpses. I dodged among the boulders seeking a hiding place. There must have

been a little hidden stream running under that particular gully, for coarse grass grew near the bottom of every boulder where the sand was moist.

If you've ever felt your head about to leave your shoulders you know how quickly one sees things at such a moment. I had not gone two hundred yards when I noticed a larger rock which appeared to rise straight out of the ground. By instinct rather than reason, I knew there was a nook there for me to crawl into. To avoid leaving footprints I leapt from stone to stone, parted the grass, and found myself in a fashion of small pit, twenty inches high, screened by grass.

Something wriggled away when I landed flat on my stomach, probably a snake. I never found out. Didn't bite me anyway. I intended to wait until the raiders had stripped the bodies, then start after what was left of the detachment. I can walk and run faster than most men and I could hear the detonations of Lebel carbines in the distance.

All was quiet for a while. Then the Berbers came, prowled around, talked among themselves. I could understand what they said. Their lingo is something like plain Druya. They were looking for me; knew I had fallen and could not locate the body. They gave up after about an hour. I was still in bad luck. They camped within fifty yards of me. They left four men on guard and I didn't dare move. One of the guards beat the grass to chase reptiles away, stopped within a foot of my face. At dawn, the whole lot stirred. They rubbed their hands with sand and then prayed.

Made me sore to hear them yelling to Allah, as if anything, even human, would like cutthroats like them. I had no use for any religion at the time; I had been a free thinker all my life, save when I was very little and tried praying for food one day instead of stealing it from grocers' stands.

They left a couple of hours after that. I heard them for a long time, the gullies carrying human voices like a speaking trumpet. Finally, I got up the nerve to get out.

The sun kissed my skull like a red-hot plate. I found the lieutenant's sun helmet, which the raiders had thrown aside, after poking a couple of holes in it for fun. I

tore up my shirt and stuffed the rags in those holes. With my head shaded I started out to locate the trail of the detachment.

Some of the pebbles were sharp as razor blades. My boots were cut to ribbons by the time I reached the sanded plain. Walking on bare soles is poor pastime. I tore my pants up and used what was left of my shirt to wrap my feet in, slipping the flapped boots over the bundles of cloth.

Until then, excitement had kept me from realizing that I was thirsty. I had had no water since noon of the preceding day. I managed to keep going all day, slept pretty well at night. But the west wind blew and when I got up I had lost the tracks. I had to go by guess and that was not cheerful.

My naked legs were burnt red like raw beef. When I touched the hair on my face it was like tearing the skin away. I've been with you when you were thirsty. You talked about bottles of white wine set to cool in a mountain brook. You spoke of the ices you'd buy in a restaurant near La Madeleine, in Paris, when you got home. You had your pants on, you were mounted, and there was some water left in the water skins.

I was alone, without shoes, clothing, hope. I felt like an old bleached bone. Like a dried date. I was delirious, I suppose. When I'd get to a shaded spot in the lee of some boulder I'd roll on the cooler sand, pile it on my belly. I squeezed my chest with my leather belt, did all sorts of crazy things I thought might ease me. Then my head would clear a bit and I'd put on my rags and go on.

Where I fell, how I got there, I can't tell. I figured later I must have lasted four days. Some'll tell you that's impossible in the Sahara. I did it.

Someone rubbed a wet cloth on my lips. I grabbed at it, sucked it in, held it against my palate. I didn't let go until my mouth was touched with a wetter one. For a long time all I knew was that I was getting a little dampness from somewhere. Then I saw several men around me. One held a *guerba*, with rounded sides, a full one. It was not until much later that they handed me a tin dish full of water. They were laughing at the lot I swallowed. I drank like a camel. Too much water is supposed to kill you after you've been

thirsty a long time. I remember thinking of that and not caring.

After my belly was full I fell asleep again. When I woke up they gave me food. There was one who was for killing me. He had a sort of washed out red beard; one of those Berber blonds that look something like an Alsatian pastor. I didn't even hate him. He was the fellow who had held the *guerba*. Another chap, the chief, said no. He handed me a fistful of dried dates, a chunk of hard cheese and a bit of meat. They didn't know I could understand their talk. I'd been too eager to grab for things to utter a word.

The chief told the rest that Allah's will had manifestly brought them to save me. It was a good thing for them, he said—they who were constantly exposed to the danger of death by thirst—to help an enemy; thus showing that a good man would help even a thirsty dog in the desert. I would have barked had he asked me. He added that it would bring them bad luck to kill me afterward for that would seem to jest with the will of the Merciful. Moreover, he stated that I had not been a fool like my chief, that I had saved myself very cleverly. The others were sore and did not see it his way. Of course, they knew he was hiding behind words, that what ailed him was a soft heart, pity. As a last resort he quoted some verse from the Koran, saying that a man might be forgiving to an infidel once in his life. I've looked for that verse since and can't find it exactly. Probably he made it up, being smarter than they were.

Later, when I was walking beside his camel on the march, he talked to me in Arabic. He said that a brave man was a brave man and should not be killed anywhere save in battle. Twice a day he gave me water. I had an idea they were taking me back to their camp across the Draa. I didn't care much. I would have followed anywhere for the water.

One day—I had been with the gang about two weeks—the fellow dismounted, took me by the shoulder and indicated the east.

"*Kasbah maghzen*," he said. ("The Government's fortress.")

Without another word he got into the saddle, his kneeling camel rose, he yelled sharply, and the whole band ran off at top speed. After walking east a couple

of hours I recognized my surroundings. I was near Hassi-Mazzer. A patrol picked me up and I went to see the captain. The detachment had returned after a few more skirmishes with the raiders, and I was believed dead. I was about to tell the whole story when it occurred to me that if I spoke the Meharistes would be sent after the fellows who had saved me. So I said I had walked, escaped miraculously. After that—well, it was too late to speak. I passed up promotion and got a transfer. When I got North the reaction hit me and I was in the hospital for a few weeks. And here I am—and . . . (Martin wiped his sweating face.) I feel better now that I've got it off my chest to someone. You know who the Berber was. . . .

IN THE mercy shown to the sergeant, De Gerval saw nothing extraordinary. Berbers were desert men, superstitious. Lakhdar ben Lardaf had probably believed he was giving a hostage to fate against death by thirst.

"What do you expect me to do, Martin?" he asked.

"Nothing, Lieutenant. Duty is duty. Just—keep telling me that I should not react to personal motives. And put me out of the way of temptation for the time he is here." Martin moistened his lips. "Also, if he doesn't like the idea of the guillotine, couldn't we arrange it somehow? Sounds like a funny favor to do a man, but he'd appreciate it. Give him a chance to escape, then—"

"That's a craven's trick, Martin."

"I couldn't ask you to let him go, Lieutenant."

"No. But I can assume some responsibility. I guess there won't be much fuss made if he's shot down here, after court-martial."

"What reason will you give?"

"His men resisted, arms in hand." De Gerval looked at the neat report ruefully, then tore it in half. "Favor for favor. He saved a Frenchman. We save him the shame of beheading. Let them howl at headquarters. On second thought, they will." He scribbled hastily. "Sign this. Participation in the court-martial. No need to bring him in here and go through the comedy. I'll see him tonight, tell him what I'm doing and why. Tomorrow, at daylight, it will be over. As for you,

Martin, take sixteen men, ride out to the well we visited yesterday and ascertain if it is still there. Officially you'll be on police patrol."

"This won't get you into trouble, Lieutenant?"

"They won't drum me out for it and I can wait a year or so longer for my third stripe. Another thing."

"What, Lieutenant?"

"I'm going to kick Amar ben Amar out of this place tonight. The informer should not be rewarded both money and pleasure." De Gerval slid open a drawer, broke a package. A heap of large silver coins gleamed. "Two hundred *douros*. A thousand francs! Too much for a rat like Amar. However—in the name of civilization . . ."

Martin walked to the door, turned and came back.

"Lieutenant, I want to thank you. You're—"

"I'm fed up with your wailings, Martin. Get out of here!"

Thirty minutes later he heard the patrol leave. He then went to the prison, had the door opened, informed Lakhdar briefly of the new decision. The Berber smiled with pleasure.

"That man," he commented, "is good. His stomach does not forget what his lips tasted. So that I die tomorrow?"

"At dawn."

"*Maktoub*," Lakhdar concluded. "It was written."

DE GERVAL gave the sergeant final instructions that evening.

"Dukers, you will have six men ready at dawn. The prisoner will be taken to the eastern face of the post and executed. The entire garrison must be present. The body will be buried according to Mohammedan rites. I leave it to you to name the noncom to fire the *coup de grace*."

"I better do it myself," Dukers said without emotion. "Martin is away and the others are new out here. It won't get me as much as one of the younger men."

The expression on the faces of both men revealed nervousness, almost disgust. Neither of them would have hesitated to kill Lakhdar in combat. Execution was a different thing, grim, done in cold blood.

The conquest of a primitive land by a

civilized people invariably drags down the conqueror to the level of his barbaric foes in ruthlessness and savagery. Humanitarian theories are speedily forgotten before raw facts and the eternal truth that they are often mistaken by the natives for fear or foolishness. Lakhdar's treatment of Martin had been a marvelous exception to a bloody rule.

Dukers had a bundle under his arm which he laid on the table. It contained the weapons and upper garments, turban and *gandoura*, of the man to be shot. As there would be no trial in the north those objects would be sent direct to headquarters.

At another table in the office was seated the official interpreter, a native who had studied in the Algiers *lycée* when a boy. De Gerval directed the form of an affidavit to be signed by Amar ben Amar. This was to identify Lakhdar beyond all possible doubt. The interpreter lined his Arabic characters neatly, until they formed almost a decorative pattern on the paper. De Gerval wrote the language fairly well, Amar understood French and could read it; but red tape was red tape and the law exacted an interpreter. No chance for misunderstanding or error.

The lieutenant sent for Amar. The trader arrived and seated himself without invitation, obviously happy, jovial. Matters were going well for him. His honor was safe.

"I also requested thy sister's presence," De Gerval said.

"She is with the women, Lieutenant."

"Then I'll question her after thou dost go, which will be more regular. As for thee, merely sign this."

Amar read the affidavit carefully, questioned the wording from long habit. Then, majestically, he applied his large scrawl to the bottom of the sheet.

"Do I receive the reward in cash or a draft on the Treasury?"

"Here." De Gerval handed him the money.

The trader counted the silver slowly. De Gerval abruptly ordered him to leave the office.

"Dukers, bring his sister, will you?"

Mabrouka came immediately. She stood diffidently before the table. De Gerval scarcely glanced at her, eager to get the questioning over.

"Thou art Mabrouka, daughter of Amar ben Yacub?"

"Yes."

"Thou hast seen the man we arrested yesterday. Is he the one who entered thy father's house and took thee away after slaying thy father's guest?"

"Yes."

"Thou dost know him to be Lakhdar ben Lardaf?"

"Yes."

"There were, in the caravan, men loyal to him to watch thee?"

"Yes."

"That's all. Thou'lt be turned over to thy brother tonight."

De Gerval was alone. The flame of the candle vacillated in the glass case of the lantern. The shadows danced. Tomorrow, in a few hours, the rising sun would outline a shadow on a white wall. Guns would crash out; the shadow would vanish and merge with the long body.

Later would come official blame for taking the law into his own hands, or rather interpreting it to suit himself. Then men would forget Lakhdar; fame would cling to his successor until he, too, died. For many years it would go on thus, until peace, which had settled in the north, seeped down to the desert fringe. He stared around the room, saw that the interpreter had left. He would rewrite the report.

A few minutes passed. Then De Gerval heard the door open, close again. He was conscious of another presence but did not turn immediately, did not look up.

"What is it, Dukers?"

There was no answer. He shifted in his chair and saw Mabrouka standing where she had stood before, expectant, waiting. The light shimmered on the silk of her baggy trousers and the slim torso in the velvet, embroidered bodice rose gracefully from the hips. Between the veil and the scarf concealing her hair, her eyes were deep, black.

"*Sidi* Lieutenant," she said, almost in a whisper.

"Why art thou here, Mabrouka?" he asked sharply.

"I was told thou wert to kill Lakhdar ben Lardaf soon."

"He will be shot, yes."

"When?"

"In the morning."

"He must not be shot," Mabrouka said determinedly.

"Go away," De Gerval ordered.

He bent over his papers on the table, to signify the conversation had ended. Amar had sent her, no doubt, to exact full punishment. Bah! Kidnapping a girl was small sin for a raider like Lakhdar, the least of his many exploits. It was like Amar to send a woman to claim what he dared not ask himself.

"Go away," he repeated.

Mabrouka moved, but not toward the door. Instinct warned him. He looked upward in time to leap aside, knocking down the chair. The girl had picked up one of Lakhdar's knives from the table. Had the lieutenant not moved, he would have received the point full in the chest.

"Stop that!" he snapped. "Drop that blade!"

But Mabrouka came forward steadily, the handle of the dagger grasped firmly in her small hand. The veil had slipped, her face was revealed. The first effect of beauty was marred by the ugly snarl which bared her small, even white teeth.

De Gerval found himself in a ridiculous position. He was ashamed to call for help. The dagger was nevertheless real. The girl was intent upon striking him and threatened alternatively throat and stomach. She circled the table. De Gerval retreated, stepped backward cautiously, spoke in a low voice, sought to reason with her. The next stroke he fended off with his left arm and the steel ripped the cloth of his sleeve. He stepped in closer, grasped her right wrist, kept her fingernails from tearing at his face. For a moment her rage enabled her to struggle. Yet she was a rather small, light woman, and he was a vigorous man. When she realized this, she dropped the knife and burst into tears.

IN RETROSPECT this episode seemed ridiculous. He laughed as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Meanwhile Mabrouka was struggling to readjust her veil which had been hopelessly torn and crumpled.

"Never mind," he said, grinning. "It is not a sin to show thy face. I'm an unbeliever and unbelievers are not men."

"*Sidi* Lieutenant," her voice rose sharply. De Gerval knew he must quiet her, or she

would be heard from the outside. Few would believe that she had been the one to start the attack.

"Be still! If it is known that thou didst try to kill me, thou'lt be placed in prison."

"Thou'lt not tell?"

"No. Though I want to know why——"

"My husband will be killed. I want to kill thee."

"Lakhdar is thy husband?"

"Yes."

"Thou dost love him?"

"Yes."

"Yet thy brother and father gave him up to us."

"They are dogs!" Mabrouka said without hesitation.

"Everything may be purchased in the market place save a father's blessing, girl. It is not good to speak thus of one's father. Hear me: In ordering Lakhdar shot, I but fulfill his wish. He would be tried later and die a vile death for killing a city man."

"No. Let him be tried. I shall tell the truth then."

"The truth? Suppose I hear the truth first, Mabrouka."

Mabrouka stopped weeping abruptly. She sank to the floor, legs folded under her body. The wet streaks still showed on her face. Her dark hair was tressed and wound around her small head like a helmet. Around her smooth throat glittered a necklace of gold coins. Tiny blue tattoo marks on her cheeks enhanced her beauty with an odd, barbaric charm.

"I first loved Lakhdar when I was a very little girl not wearing a veil. He was only a youth then, perhaps the age I am now. When he and his father came to see my father——"

"Thy brother told me he had known Lakhdar but a short time," De Gerval put in.

"He lied. It was Lakhdar's father who brought my mother to my father, long ago. She was a woman of the Berber people. Amar's mother was a low woman from Tunis. She was already old and my father had tired of her. Lakhdar's father, Lardaf, came to gather news of the caravans, to know where to locate them when they traveled south. My father gave him such news in exchange for safety for his own merchandise. After Lardaf was dead, it was Lakhdar who came.

"When I grew into a woman, Lakhdar remembered me, and asked for me. He paid a dowry as the Book orders. Even after I was veiled and ordered never to bare my face before men or speak with strangers, I met him when he came, in the garden at night. My father and my brother knew, but they said nothing. Among Lakhdar's people women are not veiled, and what was right in his eyes was right for me.

"Then the reward for Lakhdar's head was offered by the French. At the same time a wealthy man, a friend of Amar's, asked for me as his wife, offering much more than had been given. My brother feared Lakhdar's rage and decided to give him up. All is known to women in a household, although men do not believe this. I sent warning to Lakhdar, so that when the soldiers entered the house where Amar had lured him, he had left. Amar's life he spared so that there would be no blood crying between us.

"Amar sent word of his escape and warned my father that he might come and get me. So my father called the man who desired me and the man armed himself with a pistol and strong knife to wait for Lakhdar on the stairs, in the darkness. One of the negroes heard and warned my mother, who told me. We paid the black man much money to wait outside and stop Lakhdar. My mother sent word to Lakhdar not to come in but to seek safety for himself and I would join him later.

"But he loved me and he feared I would be given to someone else. He entered the house, for he is brave. Only he did not climb the stairs erect like a man, but on all fours like an animal. The gun was aimed at the level of a tall man's head. Lakhdar grasped the man by the ankles, pulled him down and they fought.

"Never yet has the jackal bitten the lion. Lakhdar killed him quickly. Then he found me and bore me away. He had horses ready and we were far from the city by night. I became his wife. But he had to return to his people who needed him. So he hid me, saying he would send for me later. Mohammed el Kettabi came and gave the words agreed upon. I followed him. That is all. But as thou seest, Lieutenant, he did not kill from choice in the city, but to defend himself. He must not die."

She was sincere in her belief that she could convince the jury. Contrasted with the greed of the two Amars the love between Mabrouka and Lakhdar was pleasing, refreshing. Too bad that in any event Lakhdar was lost.

"No, Mabrouka, they would not let him live," he said. "Thy brother would pay witnesses who would call thee a liar; and he would be sent to the machine."

"Someone will pay for his life," she said stubbornly.

Mabrouka was part'y of Berber stock, a race which considers vengeance a greater duty than chastity in women. She reacted to age old emotion, obeyed instinctively her people's ancient code.

And Lakhdar was technically a bandit, an outlaw. Yet he belonged to a tribe not yet subject to France, outside her possessions. His deeds were therefore acts of war. This was so well recognized that, many times, when less famous raiders were captured, they were released upon giving an oath of good behavior toward the French. Lakhdar's bad luck was that he was too well known, a marked man.

Without great stretch of imagination, he might be called a prisoner of war. And no civilized power shot prisoners of war. But there was the mandate of arrest by the civil authorities. His strict duty was to surrender the man and let justice take its course. Justice? A trial in which Mabrouka would be discriminated against because of her age and sex, with the accusation bolstered by false witnesses. . . .

"**P**ACK thy belongings, Mabrouka, then come back here," De Gerval said abruptly.

She looked up, bewildered.

"I do not want to go with my brother. I've told him so."

"Thou shalt not go with him."

He went out, found Dukers in the guard-room near the outer gate.

"Saddle two of the horses taken yesterday."

Then he opened Lakhdar's cell, unlocked the irons.

"Follow me."

Mabrouka had not yet returned. De Gerval handed the Berber weapons and garments. Lakhdar showed astonishment, but equipped himself wordlessly. The Frenchman looked at him with pleasure.

It would have been a shame to execute such a good looking man.

"Why?" Lakhdar asked suddenly.

"I heard thy woman," De Gerval said, briefly. "I grant thee life and freedom. In return, swear that thou'lt not fight us again, or our allies."

"I swear."

"Swear also that thou'lt not incite thy people to fight us."

"I swear."

Mabrouka entered. As became a true man, before a witness, Lakhdar stilled her first move toward him.

"Thank the Lieutenant."

Mabrouka seized De Gerval's hand, and before he could stop her, she pressed her lips to it. Then all three went into the yards, where they found the saddled horses.

"I do not yet understand," said Lakhdar.

"Thou art young. I am young. Men such as we die in battle."

Lakhdar lifted Mabrouka to the saddle, mounted lightly.

"Farewell, Lieutenant."

"Farewell!"

The gate swung open, Lakhdar's white cloak fluttered a while in the night like the outspread wings of a gigantic bird, vanished.

"That's Lakhdar ben Lardaf you just let go?" Dukers asked.

"Yes," De Gerval replied shortly.

"Ah!" Dukers concluded. Being a good sergeant, he asked no more questions.

As for the lieutenant, now that Lakhdar was gone, he began to realize the enormity of his act. There was only one fashion to conclude the night's folly. He went to the office to fill that last duty.

An hour later, while he was still working on the report, Amar ben Amar came in. He had heard of Lakhdar's departure.

"The Berber will keep his word and go far from here," he said. "Thy sergeants are loyal to thee. The rest do not count. The wounded man has just died. I shall swear that his body is that of Lakhdar ben

Lardaf. My oath will be believed and no trouble will occur."

"And thou canst keep the reward?" De Gerval prompted.

Yet the suggestion was tempting. Then he saw a smile on the informer's face, a pleased smile.

"Keep the money. I give it to thee myself. But the truth shall be told. As for thee . . ."

The lieutenant arose, grasped Amar by the shoulders and kicked him out into the yard.

Back before the table, he finished his resignation, giving a full account of his actions and addressed it to Colonel Lehagre.

"I'll be court-martialed, anyway," he thought. "But it was worth it."

IN TWO weeks he received a reply to his communication. The colonel wrote:

You're a damned fool, and I am sending back your resignation. Tear it up. Lakhdar ben Lardaf surrendered to me the very day I received your letter. I had sent word to him several times through our Intelligence agents in his region that if he'd give himself up without being forced, I'd wipe the slate. He has declined to go back as our emissary among his tribe. But we can find use for him in Morocco, among the Atlas mountaineers who are much the same breed as the Berbers.

I settled that mess of his with the civilians by wire. They have dropped the case at my request. I must admit if they had proved unreasonable, you'd have been in a stew. It is also understood that the activities of Amar will be watched

De Gerval read the letter to Martin.

"Make him an agent?" the sergeant remarked scornfully. "That's like Headquarters. He'd have made a better captain of cavalry than most——"

"Martin," De Gerval concluded sternly, "do not criticize your chiefs. The strength of an army is founded on unquestioning obedience to orders and cold carrying out of duty——"

"On those and accurate reports, Lieutenant," the noncom agreed.

There will be other tales by Georges Surdez to follow this, his first in EVERYBODY'S. Next will appear a short drama of the Western Front that will touch your emotions as few stories ever have. It is called "Turnstile" and will be in the March issue.



The ARMED GUARD

A Thrilling Tale of Wartime Shipping

By L. MURNEY MINTZER

"FLATFEET ain't in it fer bein' dumb to these squarcheads aboard here." To Lieutenant Robbins, on the munition ship's high bridge, the voice from below seemed to be unnecessarily loud. While he watched the *Champlain's* bow sway up the long slope of a sea, he listened idly, wondering what new devilment Flannigan, the signal quartermaster, might be cooking up in the armed guard. Another, deeper voice rumbled indistinguishably.

"That will be Schetky," Robbins thought. He could picture the old chief gunner's mate listening admiringly to the ready flow of Flannigan's tongue.

The ship's bow dipped slowly, and at the end of an abrupt descent a flat mass of water flung out as the ship shrugged her heavy bulk and began another climb. About the high gun platform on the fore-castle three or four men, in the white hats and windproof clothes of the Navy, lounged, sheltering themselves behind the gun from the occasional wisps of spray that curled up around the flare of the bows while they watched for the relief gun crew to

come up from breakfast. Robbins noted with satisfaction that the man on lookout was silent and alert, standing apart from the others and watching the sea ahead.

Ahead and on both bows the gray water merged into a thin mist that hung low over the gray sea. Later, when the sun had beaten away the mist, the sky and sea alike would quicken into bright blue, but now the whole world seemed gray and empty. Robbins frowned slightly, missing the familiar shapes of the other ships of the convoy. Although only two days out from New York, and still in the comparatively secure home waters, the loss of the convoy worried him slightly. More as an indication of the captain's probable reaction to the exacting regulations of the war zone than from concern for their immediate safety. The *Champlain*, with her valuable cargo of ether, a cargo that was badly needed on the other side both for ordnance and hospitals, would be directed to another convoy. Already they had reported her position over the radio. Another convoy, he knew, was only twenty hours or so behind them.

More even than at last night's carelessness that had allowed the ship to drop behind, and finally to lose the formation, Robbins wondered at the captain's air of elation. Like a small boy suddenly escaped from the supervision of a strict teacher. He grinned as he thought of the older man's half suppressed patronage of everything that concerned the armed guard and the Navy.

"Been crossin' ever since the war started and I've still got my ship," Captain Hinkle had taken care to tell him the day he had reported for duty. Robbins had said nothing to that, quite able to appreciate the other's natural distaste for the ambiguity of responsibility implied by the presence of naval personnel on merchant ships. But at first, Robbins had thought that, underneath his impatience at any sort of direction, the captain, like most others of his kind, would be willing to give the convoy system a fair trial. Now he wondered. And already he was beginning to suspect that the captain himself was not particularly forceful on the ship. The thought reminded him of Flannigan down below still talking loudly to Schetky.

He strolled around the wheelhouse and saw the captain on the far wing of the bridge puckering his bushy eyebrows over his sextant in preparation for a morning sight of the sun which was beginning to show above the bank of vapor to the eastward. Nearer at hand Robbins saw the probable explanation of Flannigan's bulk-heading. Schultz, the mate, and O'Leary, the chief engineer, were making a pretense of scanning the horizon ahead while they obviously were straining their ears to catch what the quartermaster was saying. In Schultz's case, at least, the pretense was thin. His face had a comical expression of mingled rage and curiosity as he gripped the rail with both hands and leaned out, head bent forward, with little regard for his pretended interest in the sea ahead. O'Leary, in the inevitable dungarees of the engineers' force, characteristically was less transparent. His face was serenely innocent of guile. But as Robbins appeared, the little chief glanced around, and the naval officer with difficulty suppressed a grin at sight of the glint in the Irishman's eye. The breeze fell off temporarily and the voice from below drifted up more clearly.

"What is they, I ask you, but a crowd of fresh water fishermen? That square-head from Milwaukee now—brung up drivin' one of them ka-nal boats, if the truth was known."

Robbins saw O'Leary's hand restrain Schultz stealthily. Schetky's voice rumbled again.

"Who, him?" It was Flannigan again. "Him an Irishman? Razz to you, sailor. Take a good look at that clipper beak on Mister O'Leary and guess when his mother celebrates New Year's."

The little chief jumped away from the rail in a headlong dash for the ladder. Robbins tried to appear oblivious to what was going on, more than half hopeful that the two Irishmen would meet and work off their feud. Then the lookout sang out excitedly:

"*Periscope!* Broad on the starboard bow, sir."

Everyone on the bridge stopped and looked around. Robbins saw that the gun crew was swinging the gun around rapidly. It wavered and paused. As he tensed expectantly, the air sucked away in a terrific rush that dragged on his eardrums and the gun muzzle disappeared abruptly in a brown-red blast. Automatically Robbins glanced at his watch. Nothing wrong with the speed of that crew, he reflected. A tall geyser of spray shot up three or four thousand yards on the bow. Flannigan rushed by with enthusiastic haste on the way to his battle station on top of the wheelhouse. Another shell clanged home in the gun. The captain was muttering irritably to himself. O'Leary had disappeared. Only Schultz stood unmoved, staring fixedly in the direction of the first splash. The gun let go again and the mate gripped Robbins' arm.

"Them sailors wouldn't be afraid of that there banana crate, Lieutenant," he said in a low, reassuring voice.

Glancing suspiciously at the big mate, Robbins thought he saw the corners of the other's mouth twitch slightly as he pointed. Robbins leveled his glasses.

"Cease firing!" he called before the second splash appeared. Inwardly he cursed the necessity for shooting on suspicion. Then the floating bit of wood disappeared behind the splash. He turned and met Schultz's quizzical look with a grin.

"One on us all right, Mister Schultz.

But they didn't miss that crate so far, at that."

In spite of the feud between the big mate and the armed guard, Robbins liked Schultz. In contrast with the ineffectual captain he seemed so dependable.

"Y-as," Schultz agreed with an answering smile. "An' if they had hit it they'd want some more paint for that cannon of theirs." Then his face clouded as Flannigan scrambled down from the wheelhouse and came toward them.

"Some gun pointin' that, Mister Robbins." In spite of the handicap of his officer's presence, Flannigan managed to shoot a jeering look at Schultz as he went by them toward the ladder.

"Bear a hand with your breakfast and get up here to relieve me," Robbins ordered, unwilling to encourage the Irishman. In spite of the graying hair of both it was hard to dispel the illusion of two boys daring each other with chips on their shoulders.

Schultz turned to follow Flannigan below.

"Three gallons of paint and a roll of canvas," he rumbled over his shoulder. "An' us just puttin' to sea. No good'll come of such waste." Shaking his head slowly from side to side, he went down the ladder.

THE ship quickly settled back into her customary plodding routine. On the forecastle Schetky, unimpressed by the close shot at the crate, was telling the men how far they had to go to meet his standard of gun pointing. The radio operator appeared and handed Robbins a message.

CHAMPLAIN JOIN CONVOY AT SEVENTEEN
HUNDRED TONIGHT POSITION

He stuffed the blank in his pocket without finishing it. The captain was already at the chartboard with his copy, plotting on the chart the position where they would meet the convoy coming up from astern.

Robbins thought back over the busy week since he had brought his crew aboard to man the *Champlain's* newly installed guns. Except for Schetky and Flannigan, who had both grown gray in the service, they were all recruits, almost as ignorant

of the Navy and its ways as the crew of the ship. About anything else but his guns, Schetky was reasonable enough; but in his twenty odd years of ministering to the needs of ships' batteries, he had achieved a settled conviction that the service, in other words, his universe, existed solely for the sake of his guns. Spotted with red lead showing through carelessly daubed paint, even rusty in certain inconspicuous places, the *Champlain's* guns had been an insult to the old chief's fastidious eyes.

The ship's company, particularly the mate and the chief engineer, followed another ideal. These two, handicapped as they were by a typical wartime, nondescript crew of makeshift seamen and raw landsmen, had created that ideal, a perfectly organized world that most certainly included neither guns nor their crews.

Flannigan, probably to enliven a cruise that promised to be dull, had sensed the possibilities of the situation and from the first had encouraged Schetky to insist upon doing things up in real service style. The result had been immediate war. First it had been over paint. Robbins chuckled at the recollection of Schultz's expression the morning before when he had come into the officers' mess and announced that his varnish locker was broken open.

"There'll be no varnish stirrin' aboard this ship," he had growled with a side glance at Robbins. "An' I doubt not it's some of your men, Lieutenant, that's tryin' to get drunk on my varnish."

Robbins, long familiar with gunner's mates and their conception of the proper appearance of a gun, had said nothing, doubting that the varnish had been taken for the alcohol that it contained.

"Yesterday they wanted shellac for their gun. That's what they said," Schultz went on. "As if I'd swallow that yarn. Usin' shellac on the weather deck at sea!"

The real war had started soon after, when Schultz had discovered fresh varnish on the guns. To his frugal soul the theft itself was nothing compared to the sinful waste of ship's stores. The same day Flannigan had fouled the chief engineer over a little matter of cleaning gear. Flannigan being on the bridge really had nothing to do with the guns. Almost hourly since, something had occurred to add fuel to the flames of enmity between the two hostile camps.

ROBBINS looked up and noted with satisfaction that the visibility was improving. Ahead and on both beams he could see clearly for six or eight thousand yards. Only on the starboard bow the sun's light seemed to be diffused into a luminous haze that sagged in a broad belt upon an indefinite horizon. As his eye traveled carelessly, trying to probe into the tantalizingly uncertain region, he stiffened suddenly and raised his glasses. A vague bit of color, something that did not move in harmony with the restless water, caught his attention. At first, with the glasses, he could see nothing. Then again, as he swayed on his feet to the roll of the ship, something flitted across their field. He hesitated, thinking of the false alarms that kept the crew stirred up. Was it imagination, or had he seen a dim solid shape in the mist? The impression grew although now he could see nothing. He reached back and turned on the general alarm switch.

"Broad on the starboard bow!" he shouted to the gun crew.

Behind him somebody laughed, and turning he saw Schultz, just up from below, picking his teeth and looking carelessly in the direction of the bearing. Flannigan came rocketing up the ladder and ran full tilt into the mate's broad back.

"Look where you're going, you left-handed son of a beachcomber!" the mate roared, untangling himself from the man ropes.

"Can't make it out, sir." Schetky looked up questioningly from the gun. Then, with appalling abruptness, a solid column of water shot up close alongside, so close that some of the water dumped down on the forecastle. In the midst of the noise of ripping water, the sharp grunt of a gun reached them.

"Bearing, five five!" Flannigan called. "I see the flash, sir."

Still baffled by the sun, they could see nothing. At the gun the pointers were calling excitedly to each other as they tried to find the target. On deck men were running and shouting in sudden panic at the mysterious shell that had dropped out of the sky.

A blinding flash on the starboard wing of the bridge, and with a tremendous suck of air the whole side of the ship was suddenly enveloped in flame. When Robbins

picked himself up he looked for the captain. Where the latter had stood the bridge ended in a tangle of twisted metal and torn canvas still smoldering. Schultz was dragging himself to his feet with one hand, the other clutched at his shoulder.

"Range, five—O—double—O." He was surprised at the sound of his own voice in the abrupt destruction that had fallen upon them. Amidships another stunning crash, an eruption of wood and metal. Half dazed he saw a jagged hole appear in the funnel.

"Get on! For Christ's sake get on!" Schetky exhorted the pointers. Then, with startling suddenness, the low black shape of a submarine appeared silhouetted by the sun through a rift in the mist. The bow gun let go instantly and the splash shot up to the right of the small target.

"Left, two—down one—double O." Robbins called his spot mechanically. He glanced then at Schultz. The mate had apparently recovered.

"Captain's gone, sir," he said and pointed at the shattered port side. "Shall I head for 'em?" he asked going to the wheel. For the first time Robbins saw that the helmsman was down. He glanced back and saw that the after gun could not bear.

"Come around twenty degrees. Let the after gun bear," he directed briefly. Schultz nodded and twirled the wheel. The bow gun let go again, then a moment later the after gun.

"Steady," Robbins called over the voice tube as the first shot from aft fell far beyond the target. "Hold on her water line."

The shells from the submarine were coming in with incredible rapidity and uncanny precision. About them the air screamed with flying bits of metal, punctuated by the clump and rattle of falling rigging. He squeezed a little hope out of the fact that the enemy was firing a trifle high, many of the hits being on the upper works of the *Champlain*. And about the submarine splashes were sprouting thickly. But the contrast between the low bit of gray that was the enemy and the *Champlain's* high black sides was sickeningly evident.

"Why don't you hit him, you louts!" The little figure of the chief engineer was dancing around the gun on the forecastle waving its arms at the loaders.

"Let 'em be, you!" Flannigan appeared on deck and shouted, running toward the

engineer. As Robbins opened his mouth to shout at them, the deck just forward of the gun bloomed with fire. The blinding, withering flame of the explosion seemed to flow over them all. To a man they were swept flat by the concussion, even before the deadly black and red cloud of gas wrapped around the gun.

"You take the bridge, Lieutenant!" Schultz was gone before Robbins could answer and was down on the forecastle as the first of the prostrate figures got up. On the starboard life line a limp form hung head downward. Schultz slipped on a dark spot as he approached the gun. Schetky was up, clinging dazedly to the breech plug. The mate stooped and picked up a shell. Robbins saw a long tear in his coat over the shoulder blade. As he moved, the raw flesh showed through the cloth. O'Leary, hatless and with his clothes strangely torn, was getting up from his knees with another shell. The others got up, all but the man on the life line and one other who lay flung against the deck winch like a bundle of discarded clothes.

"Carry on!" Schetky shouted at the others. The plug clanged shut and instantly the gun let go.

A shell burst in the air abaft of the bridge, spattering metal over the waist of the ship. Shrapnel, Robbins noted dully. Nightmare descended upon him. He shouted ranges and spots mechanically. Got to get them soon . . . The mainmast crashed down . . . Can't stand this long . . . A hit that time? Damn it, no . . . What's the matter aft? Schetky had relinquished his plug to Flannigan and disappeared. Was it a dream or had he come back and reported the after gun out of commission . . . Where was the captain? Oh, yes. He was gone . . . Thank God the engine still throbbed steadily . . . Always the submarine, with its superior range, kept at extreme distance, an almost impossible target, and with regular precision sprayed them with shrapnel . . . Shrapnel? Why didn't they use shells and sink her?

"Come right, quartermaster. Keep heading for her." Without recollection of what had happened Robbins saw that a strange man had the wheel. One, two, men lay quiet behind him. Fire curled up around the radio shack . . . Had the submarine report gone out over the radio? Vaguely he remembered giving the operator

their position from the chart. The increasing roar of the flames mingled with the rip of water alongside in a half heard murmur; it was punctuated by the crash of the bow gun and the vicious, ear splitting detonations of shell bursts. Voices, his own and the others, seemed distinct, strangely unaffected by the pandemonium about him. The submarine was circling again.

"Right rudder! Must keep him away from the stern."

"Won't answer, sir." The voice of the helmsman instantly focused all of Robbins' attention. He looked and saw the bow waver slightly, then fall off slowly. The after gun was silent. As he turned to look aft a shell burst somewhere forward. A yell from the gun.

"She's jammed!"

The sudden silence lasted a full minute before Robbins realized that the submarine, too, had ceased firing, was heading around toward their stern, growing more distinct as she emerged from the glare of the sun.

HE HURRIED aft. Schetky and the mate were working over the hand steering gear. O'Leary, with a handful of deck force and engineers, half of them wounded, was fighting the fire amidships. The ship gave a heavy roll to port and the foremast tottered and crashed down, sending up a shower of sparks from the burning radio shack. The after gun squatted on its haunches like a stricken monster, its recoil cylinders seared and cracked by a direct hit.

Schetky looked up briefly, his face grim with sweat and drawn with exhaustion.

"Plug cracked forr'd, sir. And you can see, there." He pointed at the after gun.

"Go on with the steering gear." Robbins' eye lit on the plug of the after gun as he spoke. It seemed to be undamaged. "Give me a hand here," he called to Flannigan who was helping fight the fire. "Let's take this plug to the forr'd gun."

Flannigan and several others followed him up on the elevated gun platform. The submarine was less than a thousand yards off coming right up under the *Champlain's* stern. As they busied themselves at the gun something snapped and cracked in the air overhead. An instant later the staccato rattle of a machine gun reached them. The plug came free. Flannigan and one of the others staggered under its weight as the

ship rolled. Robbins waved the others down out of range of the machine gun. Bits of wood flew from the broken stub of the mainmast overhead. The man with Flannigan stumbled and fell forward against him, knocking the plug from his hands. Robbins caught up the plug with Flannigan. They staggered toward the ladder again. O'Leary appeared with a rifle in his hand, and, seeing the two up on the exposed platform, sprang to aid them. At the head of the ladder Flannigan straightened up. His fingers relaxed, fumbled to regain their hold; then he plunged down upon the deck.

"The dirty murderers!" Snatching up his rifle again, O'Leary scrambled up, and, kneeling in plain sight of the submarine, he fired at the men crowded on her fore deck. A man wavered, then pitched forward and slid down her sloping side into the sea. Three or four quick shots, and Robbins dragged the chief down to safety just as another man collapsed on the submarine. The others were manning her gun. It trained around and fired. Overhead and behind them the shell burst, the charge making the water boil beneath it. Mechanically Robbins noted that they were still firing shrapnel. He looked forward and saw that the bow was falling off. Already it looked as if the bow gun might bear on the submarine. He ran forward.

"Ready to open fire in a minute." Schetky was at the gun, replacing the plug.

"On the ship, there!" At the hail Robbins jumped to the side and saw an officer on the submarine waving his arms. "You may man your boats. We haf ceased firing."

As Robbins hesitated, trying to match the calmly courteous tones of the German officer, the solution of the submarine's tactics dawned upon him. Of course! They were using shrapnel, firing sparingly, because they didn't want to sink the ship. They were after the cargo. And the chances were that the stiff resistance of the *Champlain* had forced them to use up most of their shrapnel at long range.

"Ready, sir." Schetky called softly from the gun.

Looking around, Robbins saw two quiet forms beside the gun. His jaw set and he turned back. He waved at the submarine and pointed at the colors that flew from one of the *Champlain's* cargo booms.

"We'll carry on, thank you," he shouted across the water.

"You're too damned anxious, Fritz," O'Leary's high pitched voice came from aft, and, leaning out, Robbins could see him thumbing his nose. The chief engineer was untroubled by scruples about politeness to Germans. The German officer shrugged his shoulders and nodded to the gun crew. The gun blazed and another shell burst against the *Champlain's* side. Robbins ran over to his gun, saw that it bore on the submarine and called to the pointers.

"Range, five hundred! Fire when you're on!"

The gun trained around rapidly, hesitated, swung back and slammed out its shell. It struck close beside the target, lifting a boiling mound of water that lapped over on the submarine's deck. More men swarmed up from her open hatches and a wild hope came to the men on the *Champlain*. The water subsided, the submarine's engines coughed, and she slid swiftly under the cover of the larger ship's stern.

"Shook up the Hun that time, sir," Schetky said as they watched her disappear.

There seemed to be little doubt that the submarine had suffered some damage. Carefully keeping astern of the *Champlain*, where the bow gun could not reach her, she opened the range until she was only a moving strip of gray on the horizon. Robbins, watching through his glasses, could see men clustered on her conning tower. Then, as Schultz completed his repairs to the steering gear and the bow swung around, the familiar dark red flash flickered on the submarine. The shell struck the water a hundred yards on the starboard beam.

CLAMOR and the ripping concussion of hits closed in about them again. The enemy was using more high explosive shell now, and the effect was soon apparent. Water poured into the ship through jagged rents in her high sides. Amidships the mounting flames steadily thrust back the little crew who fought the fires. Slowly the ship listed over. At last the bow gun ceased firing and Schetky reappeared on the bridge.

"Gun no longer bears, sir. Too much list."

"Very good," Robbins acknowledged dully. He eyed the gun hopelessly. With

a thirty degree list on the ship the gun reared at a crazy angle, its muzzle pointing at the empty sky. The shells were coming at longer intervals, but they still searched the ship with remorseless accuracy. Smoke rolled upward from amidships in solid clouds, and Robbins noted with satisfaction that it frequently blanketed them from the enemy. He turned wearily to pass the word to man the boat and saw a smoke blackened figure coming up the ladder. With difficulty he recognized the mate. Schultz was gasping for air as he picked his way across the wreck of the wheelhouse. He halted, with one hand resting on the break of the rail where the bridge ended in a gaping hole—the mark of the first hit. Robbins, noticing it, felt that time itself had grown old since that first shell had hurled the captain overboard.

Without a trace of antagonism Schultz grinned wearily at Robbins. He didn't seem to notice that his other hand was resting on Schetky's shoulder. The latter, knowing what must come next, glared at the distant enemy and waited.

"Well, Schultz," Robbins began after a long pause. "It's about time."

As if to hurry them the ship lurched sluggishly and sagged a bit deeper in the water.

"Been shorin' up the 'midship's bulkhead," the mate explained.

"Any boats left?"

"One," Schultz gasped painfully. His right arm, Robbins saw, still was damp with blood from the wound in his shoulder. "It'll carry most all that's left." He stared dazedly at the sprawling forms that lay thickly just back of the gun platform. Didn't seem quite right to be leaving them—with the submarine still apparently undamaged. "The gun gone?"

"Might as well be—with this list on her," Robbins answered. "We could still shoot—if we had her on an even keel and that fellow would close in a bit."

"The list, you mean? Can't shoot because of that?" Schultz brushed his hand across his singed eyebrows as if the flames were still blinding him. Then he straightened abruptly and clutched Robbins. "Where's that paint slingin' gunner of ours, Lieutenant?"

Even then Robbins noticed the "ours."
"Ah, dig the tar out of your eyes,

Schultz," Schetky growled with a trace of good-humored spirit.

Schultz turned half around and grinned back at him.

"What'd you say if I give you a few more shots at that fellow?" He indicated the submarine with a thumb. "Lieutenant, I can put her back on an even keel—for a minute or so. It'll finish her, but she'll come back first."

"What? The bulkhead?" Robbins asked with sudden hope.

Schultz nodded.

"I'll knock out the shores if the gunner here is man enough to stick by the gun. He may get wet."

"Go on, you squarehead." Schetky was alive with new hope. "See. The Hun's closin' in. Do your stuff. Come on, people!" he shouted at a small group of men who were still fighting the fire under O'Leary. "Man the gun! We're goin to pass a bokay to Fritz."

O'Leary scrambled up the ladder.

"What's up?" he asked eagerly.

"Wait!" Robbins called abruptly, his eyes on the submarine. "You think you can take the list off her, Schultz?"

"It's a fair chance, sir. An' she's goin' soon anyways."

"All right, then," Robbins said hurriedly. "You stand by. First we'll make a play at abandoning ship. I've got a hunch that they want some of our cargo. We'll send off a panic party, put up a——"

"I got you, sir," O'Leary interrupted. "I'll put on that show."

"All right . . . Schetky, how many men have you?"

"Three, sir. No pointers," Schetky answered, with another significant look at the forecastle.

"All right, get 'em up to the gun, with ammunition. And lie down out of sight. I'll join you there after the panic party shoves off. Bear a hand now!"

Schetky disappeared on the double.

"O'Leary," Robbins continued, "get everybody except Schetky's men. Get out the boat, throw over the Carley floats and make it look as if we were quitting. Make it fast now . . . And, Schultz, when they're clear you stand by to knock out your shores. Wait till the submarine closes in on us."

Except for a scattering attempt at a cheer the men displayed a fair appearance

of terror as the boat got away. Some of them leaped into the water from the rail. Robbins, faintly surprised that O'Leary had registered no protest at leaving the ship, cautiously crawled forward. The submarine had ceased firing as soon as the boat was rigged out.

FOR a long five minutes after the panic party left, the submarine lay motionless. The flames aft mounted higher. Although neither Robbins nor Schetky spoke, both were conjecturing how long it would take the fire to reach the compartment in which the mate waited for the word.

"There she comes," Schetky whispered at last. The submarine seemed to grow smaller as she headed around toward them. About four thousand yards, Robbins estimated the range, after an interval of waiting.

"I'll wait till she's within two thousand before I give the word to Schultz," he said aloud to the gunner's mate.

Slowly, terribly slowly it seemed to the waiting men, the range closed. They could make out men on her deck now. What if she should let go a torpedo after all? Robbins stifled the thought. No submarine would take all those chances on the surface without a good reason. In spite of the slowly increasing list in that calm sea, the ship seemed peaceful except when a shift in the breeze swept the blistering heat from aft down upon them. Glancing back, Robbins caught sight of a moving figure, then O'Leary's face peering cautiously around a stanchion.

"The damned Irish——"

"They're going to shoot," Schetky announced calmly.

Robbins, lying flat on the deck, peered through a mooring chock at the approaching submarine. He held his breath as he saw the gun train around toward them. Abruptly it bloomed with smoke and fire. For a brief instant they could see the deadly black dot rising again at the background of the discharge. Then blinding, searing flame seemed to flow over Robbins accompanied by an annihilating concussion. He felt pleasantly conscious of drifting into a new peace.

"You're all right now, sir." O'Leary's familiar face was the first thing that took form out of the mellow haze that seemed to

shut out vision. He was suddenly conscious of a tearing ache in his head. Looking about as his eyes cleared, he saw the gun behind O'Leary against a background of blue sky.

"The shell burst against the deckhouse, sir." Schetky's voice seemed to come from a distance. "Bit of splinter got you in the head. I just give the word to Schultz. They're coming on. Don't suspect nuthin', sir."

Strength came rushing back with returning consciousness. He struggled to get up. Then he remembered the danger of betraying their presence and remained on his knees. He stared at the muzzle of the gun. It was slowly moving downward.

"Schetky!" He grasped the chief's arm. "Is she going to right herself?"

As if in answer to the question, the ship lurched far over to a starboard, rolling until it seemed that the men on the deck of the submarine must see them. Then slowly, with an infinitely weary motion, she came back. Down below somewhere there was a dull boom as a bulkhead sprung under the pressure of the water.

"How far?" Robbins asked, afraid to risk a look. Schetky peered through the mooring dock.

"Less'n a thousand yards, sir."

"Stand by!" Robbins whispered exultantly. He looked around and saw that the other three men were out. "O'Leary, take the plug and load as soon as we fire. Schetky and I will point."

"Can you stand up, sir?" O'Leary asked. "It's still bleeding quite a bit." He pointed at Robbins' head.

For the first time Robbins noticed that the front of his blouse was damp with blood. But except for a slight faintness his head felt clear. The stern of the *Champlain* was settling faster now.

"Is the gun loaded?" he asked.

Schetky nodded and, reaching up, turned the sight scale down to five hundred yards.

"Now!" Robbins shouted and sprang to the elevating wheel. The submarine lay less than three hundred yards from the ship. The gun was deserted, but a squad of men stood by the rifles. In the instant that he saw their faces through the sighting telescope, he read amazement and alarm.

"On her conning tower!" he called to Schetky. The gun swayed, then steadied.

Bullets ripped and snapped about them, striking the gun and whining overboard. He pressed the firing key.

The gun slammed back on its recoil cylinders. Scarcely conscious of the jar he stared at their target. Her water line bulged, a red and black flash bloomed out, and the center of the boat ripped apart.

"Ready!" O'Leary called as he slammed the plug home on another round. Robbins hardly knew that he had pressed the firing key again until he saw another mound of water shoot up beside the submarine. Her bow plunged, her screws thrashed the surface for an instant, then lifted clear.

"Got her," Schetky announced briefly. The ship lurched sickeningly. "She's goin'——" Schetky stopped, clutched at his side and fell forward on his face. Robbins noticed then that the machine gun was still rapping defiantly from the sinking submarine.

The *Champlain's* bow reared. Robbins started toward Schetky, lost his footing and slumped down against the life lines, suddenly conscious of his weakness. Someone lifted him from behind. He struck the sloping side and plunged into the water, to come up in a moment gasping and paddling weakly. The bow towered above him. Schultz appeared at the rail, clinging to a stanchion. Instead of climbing over the life lines he stopped and looked for something in the water. The ship was rolling her bow higher.

"Come on! Bear a hand!" Robbins heard O'Leary's voice from the water close

at hand. But the mate shook his head, turned away and disappeared.

Steam roared up out of the ship, blotting out the bridge as it slipped downward. She twisted and seemed to topple over on them as her bow lifted straight up. Then with a tremendous clamor of steam and escaping air, she plunged downward. Water boiled around them. Robbins felt himself going down. He came up, gasped, his lungs full of air and choking spray. A wave rolled him under again. Vaguely he felt a sense of comfort stealing over him; his arms and legs seemed to be struggling. Several times he thought he felt air in his face, then water. It hissed and foamed in his ears, the noise finally melting into a distant roaring.

"Here you are, sir." Hours later it seemed, he opened his eyes and saw the bow of the ship's boat above him. O'Leary reached out and caught his arm. "It's all right," he called as he saw Robbins looking around as if he missed someone. "Here's the mate."

They hauled him over the side. A man lay on the after thwart with his head propped against the gunwale while the mate poured whisky down his throat.

"What did the mate go back for?" Robbins asked as soon as he could talk.

"Him." O'Leary pointed at the man on the thwart. "He's got a bullet through him, but it's not bad. The mate sez he'll come around. It's the gunner, Schetky."

"He'll come through," the mate called over his shoulder. "I'll be needin' him on my next ship."



*A Brief,
Strange Tale of
Central America*



The GOD of CANDELARIO BU

By JOHN STEUART ERSKINE

THERE is no Baedeker guidebook in which you may read of the Ciguapa Bridge, for tourists pass through Olancho only rarely and then by mistake. But someday, no doubt, it will be described thus:

The railroad bridge over the Ciguapa River, seventeen kilometers from the city of Olancho and one kilometer from the town of Jutiquire, was designed in 1913 by Raoul Peyrault and is the fourth highest bridge in the world. It is 760 feet long, and 492 feet high.

You will read this description and feel a touch of surprise that Olancho, the most backward of the Central American republics, should boast so fine a structure, and then you will turn the page and forget. There is nothing interesting in a bridge; not even in these three great spans that tiptoe across the rocky gorge of the Ciguapa, not even in these slim girders that moan like great harp strings when the December northers sweep in from the Caribbean. Yet once this bridge was a god, and therein lies this tale.

THE bridge had not been long constructed when Jutiquire began to blossom with prosperity. The pack roads which formerly had made a great detour to the north to a good ford across the rocky Ciguapa River were now abandoned, and all cargoes were brought to Jutiquire to be shipped on the train. Wherefore money seemed unlimited, and the rejoicing Jutiquireños called the bridge blessed.

Prosperity, however, had overlooked Pío Lozano, the shoemaker, and even now he could not earn more than sufficient money to keep him in a happy state of semi-intoxication. So Pío bethought himself of marriage as a means of easing his weary life, and he fixed upon a young widow, Carmela Ramírez, as the most suitable object of his affections. For one thing she was rather pretty; for another she owned the little shop at the corner of the plaza and did a small business in salt cheese, beans and fruits. Pío put on his collar and set out to conquer.

The courtship of Carmela was disappointingly simple. Almost immediately she

surrendered herself to his embraces. Then Pío suggested that they wed. Carmela stared at him and smiled cynically with one side of her mouth. No, she told him, a woman had to work hard enough to support herself without adding a large and hungry man to the load. Pío tried to take her in his arms, he implored her to be his, he threatened to kill himself and to lie upon her conscience forever; and his protestations were savored with the smell of Government rum. Carmela laughed.

"You do well enough for a lover, Pío," she told him. "But for a husband I should need a better man. *Andate, vos!*"

Indignantly Pío jerked out his revolver and fired six shots into Carmela's bosom. Her face as she fell, had the pathos of a hurt child's. She gave a small, whimpering sigh as she lay upon the floor, and so she died. Dramatically Pío pointed the revolver at his own head and pulled the trigger. The hammer snicked upon an empty cartridge. With a curse he flung the weapon away and staggered up the track toward Olancho. What he intended to do, he could not have said; but through his drunkenness he remembered that if the soldiers caught him, he might have to spend an unpleasant three months in prison for murder. Then he came to the Ciguapa Bridge.

The sight of the bridge suggested a new plan to Pío. Here was the opportunity for a spectacular suicide that would be an inspiration to Olancho lovers forevermore. He staggered out onto the bridge. Now the river was roaring beneath him, and he could see women washing their clothes at the edge of the water. He looked back. Behind him, at the end of the bridge, were men, possibly soldiers. He stepped forward and over the end of the ties. Then, as he felt himself falling, his nerve failed and he clutched at the ledge of the great stringer six feet below the rails. His hands grasped it, but the crashing jerk of his body tore them loose, and with a shriek he fell. He turned over once; then his body settled and plunged feet downwards. He struck the water, and a great wave of spray was scattered from around him.

Pío's suicide was a success beyond his wildest ambitions. The newspapers gave it full space and paid no undue attention to the unfortunate murder preceding it.

Murders are not classed as news in Olancho, while all the world loves a lover. So it came about that many dejected suitors made pilgrimage to the Ciguapa Bridge and cast themselves down, finding something romantic in being a nuisance to hard working washerwomen. But the Government, considering it unappreciative of the public to use their most important national structure as a lover's leap, instructed the authorities of Jutiquire to appoint a watchman to keep the bridge, Horatius wise, against all comers. After the usual delays, a house was built beside the railroad track, and Candelario Bu, a trustworthy old Indian, was placed in charge.

CANDELARIO was a stubby, strong little man, coppery faced, and with a dozen white hairs of beard on his receding chin. In his youth he had been a packer and had carried his hundred-weight of pottery, head sugar, or fruit fifty miles across the mountain trails to Olancho, so as to earn three *pesos*. Then he had been a soldier and had fought bravely through five revolutions, though for what cause or party he was fighting, he never could have said. At last he had drifted into Jutiquire where he scraped a bare living for himself, his little waddling wife, and his tiny family, by selling firewood. He was highly respected, for during his occasional sprees he strode up and down the street of Jutiquire, a revolver in one hand, a machete in the other, telling all the world that he was a man. And his little, humped figure, five feet tall, seemed at that moment large enough to back all his boasts. Sober, however, he was quiet as a lamb.

Candelario took cheerfully to his new work. All day long he trotted back and forth across the bridge, warning away would-be passers. This was difficult at first, for the bridge had long been looked upon as the natural crossing between Jutiquire and the capital. Once he nearly had trouble with a basket seller who felt no inclination to turn back and lose eight miles by seeking the ford.

Candelario placed himself in the peddler's path.

"Stop!" he commanded.

The basket seller made an unpleasant remark about Candelario's immediate ancestry and advanced. The Indian drew a

large revolver from under his loose shirt.

"Turn back," he ordered, cocking the revolver and flourishing it. "If you attempt to commit suicide, I shall hit you a shot."

The basket seller waved helpless hands.

"But, man," he protested, "I am not wanting to commit suicide. I am going to the capital."

"Go around," said Candelario.

"But, man," the peddler insisted, "it is three leagues."

"Go around," repeated Candelario, aiming his revolver with great precision at the basket seller's right eye. The peddler turned back, for there could be no doubt of the Indian's resolution.

Once a month only, Candelario was absent from his bridge, and on that day he trotted the four leagues to the capital and gave a *real* to the priest in gratitude for God's goodness to him.

Candelario had been guardian of the bridge many months when first it occurred to him to look down. He stood on the ends of the ties in the center of the bridge and stared straight down between his feet. He saw the great steel uprights taper away until they were thin as threads in their tiny concrete foundations. He saw the swirling brown river and the insect small figures of the washerwomen, and to his ears came the ghostly moaning of the gigantic girders. Under his bare feet the bridge pulsed and trembled as though it were sighing in its sleep. And Candelario was afraid.

A new sound disturbed him, and he looked up to see bearing down upon him a small, red car upon which sat the roadmaster, a tall, good-natured, gold-toothed *gringo* whom the Indian knew well. The car slowed down and came to a stop.

"Take care there, man," bellowed the roadmaster in his strange *gringo* version of the Spanish language, "if I had been a train, you would have been killed."

Candelario smirked and tugged at his old straw hat.

"Yes, misti," he said politely and shifted embarrassedly from one foot to the other.

"How many suicides this week?" asked the roadmaster humorously.

"None, misti," answered Candelario. Again the wind wailed in the girders, and the bridge stirred. The Indian looked apprehensive. "What is that, misti?"

The roadmaster laughed.

"The bridge is hungry," he suggested. "It hasn't eaten a man in months."

He gestured to his boy. The car coughed away up the track and left Candelario thinking.

That evening when the train had passed, the Indian crept timidly out onto the bridge and flung two maize tortillas into the abyss. The wind caught them and flapped them about wildly, but at last they dropped safely into the stream and were lost to sight. Again the great bridge moaned in the breeze, but to Candelario its voice seemed softer and more satisfied.

Candelario was an inarticulate soul and did not define his religious position even to himself; but thereafter he visited Olancho no more. He did not deter his wife from keeping up her religious observances, but to him these had become empty of meaning. His duty was to the bridge. Every night he fed it; every day he guarded it from the feet of the profane. He felt himself to be its priest, and at times he crouched shivering on the ties, listening to the great moaning of the god and glorying religious wise in the feeling of his own littleness. At other times he felt proud in his reflected grandeur, and he patted the bridge patronizingly, stroked its giant girders and told it to rest in peace, since no harm would come to it while he was on the watch. But the bridge, resentful of such familiarity, growled sullenly; and Candelario dropped to his knees and prayed wildly for forgiveness, offering it eggs for dinner, fresh eggs, if only it would deign to pardon its most unworthy priest. Once he had to promise to walk twice across the bridge upon his knees before he could quiet its wrath, and he completed the vow with knees swollen and bleeding.

THE winter came on slowly. There were no serious floods, but a few noisy rainstorms tore their way across the country. During these Candelario sallied out into the dark and knelt on the bridge in the drumming rain, his old arms stretched wide, his wizened, monkeylike face to the lightening sky, defying the thunders in the name of his god which set its shoulder against the wind and roared back a challenge to the roaring clouds. And when all was over, when the tattered clouds had wandered away up the wind passes into the dripping hills,

Candelario brought out a chicken and flung it down that the bridge might rest content.

Now, a good chicken is worth from six *reales* to a *peso* in the city of Olancho, and Candelario saw his capital dwindling under the ever increasing demands of the god. So one day, when the *alcalde* of Jutiquire passed by, Candelario asked timidly if it would not be possible to raise his salary to fifteen pesos a month. The *alcalde*, a tall, gray eyed man with a long experience of Indians and a supreme dislike of sharing the public money with anyone, stared coldly into Candelario's eyes, and asked him if he wished to be replaced. Instantly the Indian was all humility, begging that the *alcalde* overlook his impudence and not separate him from his bridge. For Candelario was proud of the great burden of his priesthood.

Again the dry season came on and passed and was followed by weeks when tremendous gales arose every afternoon and roared up the valleys. Then, when he walked the bridge, Candelario became aware of a new note in the voice of his god, a shriek of hunger unappeased, a menace that he dared not disregard. The wind volleyed inside his loose white trousers and bellied up his shirt, dragging him toward the edge of the bridge. The howl of the steel was terrible. Suddenly he understood. The bridge was hungry for human blood and desired the life of its priest. And Candelario Bu did not want to die. He dropped to his knees and prayed for mercy, while the great singing voice of the bridge smothered half-born the sound of his cries. Trembling, he crept away, knowing that the sin of apostasy was upon him.

He sat upon the doorstep of his house. The wind whistled in the thornbushes and tossed his sparse gray hair, but he noticed nothing; for the great bridge was singing, purring, roaring, and Candelario was sick with horror, horror of death and horror of sin. For hours he sat without moving. His wife summoned him to supper, but he made no sign. The evening train thundered by. Then Candelario arose. His meal lay in a plate upon the table. He picked it up and slunk away to the bridge and offered his food to the god. The fierce wind whipped plate and all from his hand and scattered the beans into the darkening gorge. The great bridge grumbled menacingly, and Candelario fled.

Dark fell, yet still the wind increased. A sound crept into the air, a muttering, rushing sound, for the river was rising. Thunder rumbled faraway. Rain began to fall—single, large, heavy drops that slanted down the staircase of the winds. The drops increased, and spatted loudly on the tiles of the roof. Now they were roaring down, and all the world seemed water. The frail doors creaked and heaved as though some great beast sought entrance; and above the turmoil the mighty girders of the bridge howled ravenously.

Candelario's soul was torn within him. His eyes were wide, his face blank with terror. He could resist no longer. The bridge must be fed. He snatched the baby from the bed and plunged out into the night. His wife shrieked and sprang after him, but he had disappeared in the dark, and she reeled back into the house, half-stunned by the buffets of the storm.

At the center of the bridge Candelario stopped, the baby wailing thinly in his arms.

"Hear me, oh God!" he cried. "I bring you a man, the last of my sons. Take him and spare your worshipper." He tossed the child out into the dark, and no sound of it returned to him.

For a moment Candelario waited as if for an answer. Then the great blast of the wind struck him, and he flung himself down and clung to the ties, lest he, too, be carried away. Beneath him the bridge shook violently, and the howl of the steel was deafening. And Candelario understood.

"No, no," he cried. "You have fed, oh God. Be content."

He scrambled to his feet and stood there shivering, his wet cheesecloth garments clinging to his stocky limbs.

"Come," boomed the bridge.

"No," cried Candelario's fears, but his body took a step forward. Now he was on the end of the ties, staring out into the blackness of eternity.

"Come," roared the river, invisible in the valley below.

His ears were full of the divine music, his body trembled with the pulsing life of the bridge. Suddenly his terrified soul was freed in ecstasy and lost itself in the great mind of the god.

"I come," he cried, and flung himself out into the dark.



THE DUDE RANCH MYSTERY

By E. S. PLADWELL

A LITTLE breeze fanned the blond face of Jim Vail as he rode his pony westward across bare hills to visit the ranch of his wealthy neighbor. A whistling sound accompanied the breeze, receding until a spurt of dust leaped up on the next hill northward.

Vail leaned backward. Involuntarily he reined in his horse. His astonished gray eyes noted the fall of the bullet, then swiftly he looked southward as he heard the distant crack of a rifle.

Far away, beyond the rounded contours of several yellow-brown hills, a man in black stood alongside a pony near the top of the sixth knoll. He was bringing up his rifle for another shot. He was quite slow and methodical about it. He took careful aim but Vail did not linger for the bullet. He rushed downhill into a little cañon where he halted, mopping his sunburned visage with an old red bandanna.

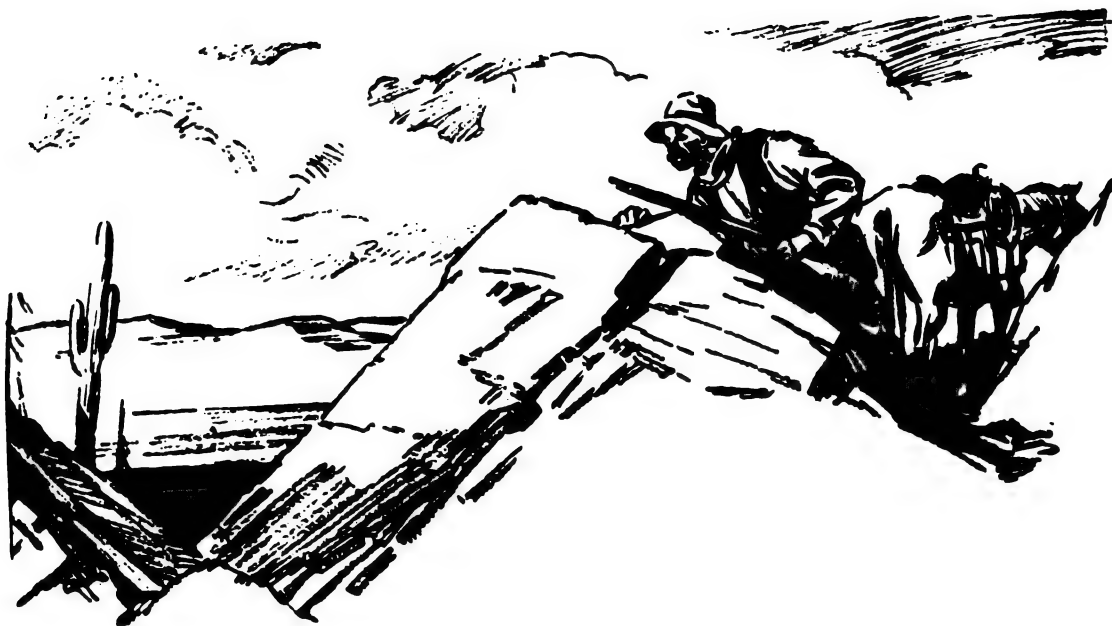
The expression on his long face was bewildered. Then he grinned wryly as he nodded several times to himself. Those quick nods were habitual whenever he came to any decision.

"It's the hired help on this dude ranch, next door," he calculated. "Yes. They

must be getting sore at me for checking up on things which have disappeared. H'm. Well, we'll see about that, then."

Keeping down in the cañon because he was unarmed, he resumed his journey with great speed toward the beautiful dude ranch of his neighbor's at the westward base of the range, where he jumped off his pony at the iron grilled gateway, walked in muddy cowhide boots through several arched hallways, and came to a halt in the oak paneled reception room of Rancho Hidalgo, feeling about as appropriate as a stray cat in a palace.

The owner's basilisk expression helped him to feel that way. She was large, erect and pigeon chested. She sat entrenched behind a great flat topped desk in the library, where the window light shone in upon a great red Navajo rug in front of the desk, just beyond the reception room where Vail was standing. Its color smote the eyes, like all the rest of the furnishings, for the dude rancheress had surrounded herself with Navajo rugs, Zuni pottery, Hopi beadwork, Mexican baskets, Aztec relics, and pictures painted according to the Southern Pacific poster style of art, which made the interior of her Mis-



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sion type ranch-house—it even had a carillon of bells in a cement false front tower—resemble a jumble of barbaric colors dumped upon carved oak furniture and hardwood floors.

New Mexico's outdoor scenery she improved by red and yellow awnings overlooking a garden of trained cactus plants, which in turn overlooked a plain so vast that its westward horizon melted into a vague blue sky line. Beneath the little mesa where the garden stood was a collection of deliberately picturesque barns and corrals in the Mission style. In the corrals were red and white and brown and white pinto ponies. Even the hired help went about in white or black angora chaps and in pink, orange, yellow or red shirts which made them visible a mile away. She liked scenery.

The appearance of Jim Vail affronted her. It was not his costume only. His wavy yellowish hair was rumpled and he needed a shave. The dude rancheress's eyebrows arched upward behind her glinting spectacles.

"Mister Vail? Oh, yes. Please do not come on the rug with your muddy boots. Thank you. You have a report to make?"

Vail frowned toward the hat in his hands. "I'm not a detective, Mrs. Jerdane, but maybe I can give you a little advice, since Aileen asks it——"

"Miss Jerdane!"

Vail began to smile. He was not handsome, for his nose was knobby and his skin was coarsened by sun and wind, but the smile made his face almost good-looking.

"Oh, all right," he agreed, with an unconcern which made her sit bolt upright. "Now, about these robberies on your ranch. They're not big but they're steady. So steady that something ought to be done about 'em. Fact is, I believe some of your people are getting almost enough nerve to be dangerous."

"Bosh!"

Vail nodded.

"All right. But someone tried to pot me with a rifle as I came over the hills from my little ranch."

Her eyes glinted suspiciously. She sat back to consider this matter.

"H'm. Rather melodramatic. Is it your object to frighten me, Mister Vail?"

"Not frighten. But you've got a bad situation here, that's all."

Someone came behind him. He turned to look into the friendly blue eyes of a lithe and very well groomed young woman in white, whose black hair was as wavy as his own. She came forward, holding both hands to him.

"Hello, Jim. What's your mother doing to you?"

"Jim!" echoed the frowning dude rancheress. "It is proper to be neighborly, Aileen, but not to *that* extent!"

"But we can't be tacky, mother. This is New Mexico, not Washington!"

The dude rancheress's cold blue eyes rebuked her.

"That will do, Aileen. Now, Mister Vail, please continue about these robberies on our ranch."

Vail looked away.

"It's day-by-day pilfering, as far as I can see," he reported. "Saddles, blankets, lumber, a mowing machine, a few ponies, maybe some cattle. Anyhow, there's no use temporizing with the thing. Some of your hired men have gone wrong. You ought to get new men."

"You are convinced that this stealing is all by my employees, Mister Vail?"

"Absolutely."

"Do you know which ones are honest and which are dishonest?"

"No, Mrs. Jerdane. I haven't got that far yet."

"Why not let Ji—Mister Vail take full charge of the place?" suggested Aileen.

The dude rancheress stared at her. Vail spoke quickly:

"Oh, I couldn't do that. I'm busy with my own little ranch."

That caused the dude rancheress to tap her lips with the end of her green fountain pen. Now that this yokel had declared his independence, she decided to make him subordinate.

"But would it not be possible to secure your services, Mister Vail?" she inquired, with a trace of graciousness.

"Of course. As a neighbor, I'll do all I can."

She frowned.

"Oh. Very generous of you, I'm sure. I hope we can persuade you, though to be—er—closer to us."

Vail nodded three times.

"Nice of you. I'll think it over, then."

"Do so," she urged. Then, archly: "We're only unprotected women, you

know. You may be just the knight errant to rescue us. That is—er—if this business is important enough to be rescued from, if you catch my meaning."

"Yes, I catch it," said Vail, stifling a smile. "Very well, then, Mrs. Jerdane. I'll think it over."

But he grinned whimsically when Aileen went with him to the cool red flagstone porch which dominated a view for seventy miles westward, though his expression was quite thoughtful.

"She wants me closer," he remarked. "She'd be surprised!" His arm was around Aileen's shoulder.

"Worried?" she asked, scanning his face.

"Somewhat. There's some funny business going on. Look at this." He took from his pocket a crumpled piece of butcher paper where a skull and crossbones were drawn with such poor artistry that they were really frightful. Beneath this was printed in ink:

GET OUT OF THE COUNTRY BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

Vail creased the paper with his thumb nail.

"My brother found it on our cabin door this morning."

"It's sort of melodramatic," she said slowly. "Still—I wouldn't want you to get into trouble on our account, Jim. It's not worth it. After all, mother can stand the losses. It's just the principle of the thing."

"I know. Same here. It makes me want to dig into this business. I'm mad."

"But you'll protect yourself, Jim."

"Oh, yes. I'll protect myself!"

He neglected to say that he was going deliberately to seek some self-protection, even if he had to hit someone on the nose, for his ire was aroused by the furtive skull and crossbones threat and the long range attack by the rifleman in the hills. He had made no bones about investigating the stealings on the dude ranch; he had walked all over the place, with pencil and paper in hand, checking up most of the movable property. There wasn't anything secret about it. It was as open and public as a brass band. Therefore his soul was nauseated at such underhanded attempts at reprisal. Had someone called him down, he would have respected the man. Skulking disgusted him.

Jim Vail was built that way. Utterly fearless, a little too inclined to underestimate the gravity of any situation, a little too prone to grin when grinning wasn't tactful, he was, perhaps because of these faults, amiably willing to face anything or anybody on any subject. Thus his contempt for these shoot-in-the-back people grew until it became a passionate desire to wallop someone.

So he excused himself to Aileen and started downhill toward the bunkhouse, looking for trouble.

II

AS A potential battlefield, the bunkhouse seemed a total loss. It was too picturesque. At the right of a downhill path leading directly toward the well kept corrals, it shone in the hazy April sunlight as if scoured recently by one of those air pressure sprays which deliver fresh tan colored paint along the walls. Between the path and the bunkhouse was a garden with imported purple wisteria climbing up on well made wooden trellises.

Seven humans were in sight. All were entirely peaceful. Four vivid cowpunchers, in pinks and blues, were loafing on a corral rail. Three more sat reading books at the sunny wooden steps of the bunkhouse, now almost at Vail's right. He smiled contemptuously.

Another man came out of the doorway, starting uphill toward Vail. This was Sherman, the hawk nosed foreman, decorative in a green shirt; white angora chaps and high heeled boots with silver spurs.

"Howdy." Vail halted, nodding three times. "You keep quite a force around headquarters, I see."

Sherman's dark eyes became uneasy, perhaps because of Vail's tone.

"Well, Mrs. Jerdane wants it that way," said Sherman, guardedly. "She likes to see the men at work."

"I'd like to see it, too. When do they begin?"

Sherman stiffened.

"What makes you ask?"

"Curiosity."

"Well, that's no business of yours. You're not the owner."

"No, but it looks as if you're going to be, some day."

"How?"

Vail smiled at him sardonically.

Well, you're either incompetent or crooked. Your reports seem to show that you don't know what's going on. You never know exactly what's stolen and you haven't any idea what to do about it. That's incompetence. If you're not incompetent, then you're getting rich off this ranch——"

"You're a liar!"

Vail's eager fist caught him between the eyes. Sherman swayed backward. His knees wobbled but he recovered his balance and then with a roar he charged forward with flailing arms, only to run into a short overhand jolt which caught him on the chin and knocked him upside down and entirely out.

Vail, elated with his easy victory, nodded and rubbed his bruised right hand as he grinned toward the bunkhouse and the corral, where the men were coming to attention.

"Anyone else?" he inquired.

There was no reply. Seven surprised pairs of eyes stared at him.

"I thought not." He nodded again, as the foreman began to arise. "You imitation cowpunchers, you grocery clerks, you mail order buckaroos, get to work while you're still in good health!"

A moon faced young blond in white angoras and a lurid pink shirt vaulted suddenly over the fence, shouting his passionate resentment as he slammed his broad-brimmed hat on the ground.

"I may have to dress in monkey clothes but I don't have to stand for *that*! Put up your hands, you fourflusher, so I can kill you legal!"

He followed up his words. He came like a mad bull, rushing, crouching, butting, lashing out with choppy pistonlike fists which crunched past Vail's guard and forced the astonished Vail to give ground.

Vail slammed desperately at the sloping forehead but the other nearly knocked the wind out of him. Vail, reeling backward, let loose a desperate uppercut which caught the man in the neck and caused him to lift his head, whereupon he received a smash on his broad nose.

The man grunted, shook his head and charged again, pounding away with those inexorable fists until Vail felt that his ribs were cracking apart. But his pain sharpened wits forced him to notice the mo-

notony of the man's tactics. The piston-like forearms kept hitting straight out. Instantly Vail fought sideways, guarding himself with arm and shoulder while sending hard overhand jolts which changed the man's face as if a sculptor was working on it with a hammer. *Bang!* His left eye puffed outward. *Bang!* His lips became thick. *Bang!* His nostrils spread apart. *Bang!* His left eyebrow split.

The man stepped backward with feet braced, panting and licking his lips while his one good gray eye coolly studied his baffling opponent. Then he marched forward again like a soldier assaulting a trench.

"You can't laugh at *me!*" he repeated, through clenched teeth.

Sensibly he changed his tactics. He sent an overhand swing which Vail didn't expect. *Sock!* Vail saw stars while bells jingled in his ears. *Sock!* His jaw went sideways and his body was gripped by a pleasant lassitude. *Sock!* A stinging pain on the end of his nose straightened him up again.

Frantically he rallied all his strength, slashing away with wild blows which sometimes connected, and then they stood toe to toe, panting and grimacing, hitting and mauling, with every bit of science forgotten in the savage desire to knock each other cold.

THEN through the fog of battle Vail's ringing ears began to recognize an insistent voice which shrieked from afar and soon came closer:

"Stop this! Cease it, I say! Stop! I command you to stop it! Immediately! Stop it! Stop, I say!"

Vail backed away from his reeling opponent, turning slowly to face the large and ominous figure of the dude rancheress behind him. She was waving a riding-crop while both her chins quivered with indignation. He noticed subconsciously that the rest of the men had scurried indoors. Even the foreman.

"What does this mean?" she demanded, in a trembling voice. "This is outrageous! How dare you men fight in plain sight of the porch! What can my house guests think of such a scene? Mister Vail! I am surprised! This is disgraceful!"

Vail said nothing. He was still panting. Likewise the other man. The dude ranch-

eress glared at them both through glinting spectacles. Her voice became crisp and dominating.

"This demands an explanation. Immediately! I am shocked at you. You are not authorized to assault my employees, Mister Vail, and as for you . . . Well, my man, you'd better pack your things. You're discharged!"

"That's not fair," gasped Vail.

She stiffened.

"And pray, why not?"

He was forced to back up his statement.

"Well, I sort of insulted him, I guess. He resented it. It's not just to punish a man because he stands up for himself."

"Oh. Then it was *your* fault."

Vail nodded.

"You can put it that way, Mrs. Jerdane. Yes."

The dude rancheress's lips tightened in a firm line which curled downward at the corners.

"Very well, Mister Vail. Thank you. I shall accept your explanation. And may I suggest that you do not visit my ranch again in the immediate future? I am sure it will prevent further incidents of this sort. Quite so." Then she remembered her own need for his services. "Of course, if you should—er—desire to take complete charge, I cannot withdraw my offer, but I do not care to have visitors mauling my men around. Is that perfectly clear, Mister Vail? Thank you. Thank you so much. I am sure we understand each other, then!"

Haughtily, with head held high, she turned toward the house again.

Vail gazed after her and then looked at the battered cowpuncher, whose expression was awed.

"That's decent of you," blurted the man. "Damned decent, considerin' that most of your original statement was correct." He held out a hand slowly while his one good eye squinted toward the bunkhouse. "I'm Lin McChesney, from Albuquerque. Cowboys, hell! Most of 'em are burglars!"

III

VAIL rode homeward thoughtfully an hour later, over the bare yellow hills to the eastward. From the top of the ridge he could look down upon two dissimilar Western civilizations, effete and pioneer.

Behind him was the yellow domain which the dude rancheress had dubbed with the high sounding name of Rancho Hidalgo. Ahead of him was his newly occupied valley, verdant with the lush grass of springtime, uncouth with patches of gray sagebrush, dotted with the white faced young Hereford thoroughbreds with which Vail and his brother hoped to start a breeding ranch. Far beyond the little Vail shanty, gleaming beneath an arbor of cottonwood trees, the hazy sunlight shone on the house and barns of the old Roberts' ranch in a broad cañon which was the eastern outlet of Vail's valley; but those buildings were so distant that they were nearly out of the picture because of the haze.

As he went along, the rider mentally reviewed some information which Lin McChesney had given him:

"You'll notice," said Lin, "that all these here dinner table buckaroos have got thin faces and mean eyes. That's some of the Old Girl's doin's. She selected 'em personal. Types of the lean, hard ridin', old-time cowpunchers, loyal and brave and picturesque. That's the way she puts it. She wanted virile, independent, outdoor he men who'd say 'Yes, ma'am' and let her dress 'em up in poodle clothes while they hung around the bunkhouse to help the scenery.

"Somebody told her she ought to go easy with these hatchet faced birds, but she knew; she *knew*! Oh, they're virile, all right. One of 'em's a porch climber, another's a busted gambler from Reno, and I guess there's three-four plain hoboos. But you couldn't tell the Old Girl that. You know how she is. Infallible. A two-fisted boss, bluff and hearty with her boys. She says so herself, though of course the boys mustn't get too virile, like you and me today, or someone's likely to get fired. You know how it is—gush, sugar and a glitterin' ax.

"The Old Girl's been lookin' worried lately, at that. Maybe she's beginnin' to miss part of her ranch, I dunno. You can't blame the burglars, though. They've got a snap. I'm almost tempted to start burglin', myself. Me? I ain't a type, I ain't virile; I just happened to blow in when they needed a sucker who knew how to do the work. I had to have a job so we struck a deal and everything's jake.

How's that for Western talk? Everything's jake. I'm learnin' fast, over there in the bunkhouse. You'd better beat it, though. Some of these yeggs might feel I was snitchin' on 'em. 'Snitch'—there's another grand old Western word! Come around again sometime and I'll educate you!"

Vail was still chuckling as he rode homeward over the ridge, though he watched for his unidentified enemy. Sure enough, the man was on the job.

Something hummed through the air. It kicked up a speck of dust some distance at his left. He yanked back his horse. He looked southward.

A solitary figure in a black overcoat and a black hat stood again in front of a horse, seven knolls away, bringing to his shoulder a rifle whose barrel jerked backward. The bullet whined down toward Vail, smacking into the ground twenty feet at his right before he heard the distant muffled report.

"This is beginning to look serious!" exploded Vail.

But being unarmed and therefore helpless, he rushed his horse down into a cañon at his left. He was just in time. A third bullet flicked over his head, chipping off a bit of shale rock on the opposite hill.

The murderous intention of the shooting caused the angry, crouching, swearing rider to urge his horse swiftly down the cañon and then into the green grass of his valley, where he raced across the flat land, looking backward to the hills but seeing no marksman, until he pulled up his panting horse at the rear of his little pine board shanty.

Jack Vail came around the corner, under the cottonwood trees. Jack was older, stockier and muddier, thicker of leg and head, a serious minded settler who, with Jim, had filed upon this promising 640 acre tract of Government land in these highlands of New Mexico. Jack walked with the slow step of a plowman, holding a bit of paper in his right hand. He halted at the corner when he noticed his brother's excitement.

"What now?" he quavered.

"Shot at," growled Jim, sliding off his horse. "Twice today. Up on the ridge yonder. We'll have to arm ourselves hereafter."

The solemn Jack nodded. He was slower and less jaunty about it than Jim, yet

it seemed to be a family habit. His tone was querulous.

"Someone's tryin' to bluff us, all right."

"I was shot at," corrected Jim. "No bluff there. I didn't think those burglars would have the nerve!"

Jack stared at his brother hopelessly.

"I told you not to interfere over there," reminded Jack, holding out his hand with the paper. "Here's another result. It's a threat."

"Threat!" Jim frowned. "Dammit, why don't they fight in the open? This business looks like a bunch of schoolboys trying to scare somebody. It's childish—unless there's something dangerous behind it. That's what I'm worried about. Let's see the latest scare."

Jack handed it over.

"I just got home and found it on the cabin door."

It was another skull and crossbones warning. Under the picture was printed:

SAVE YORE HIDES AND SKIP THE
COUNTRY BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

Jack crumpled it in his hand.

"Melodrama," he decided. "Still, we'd better watch ourselves. Some of this melodrama's getting too damned close!"

IV

THE Vails started to make a few preparations for defense but were pounced upon before they expected it.

The raid came that night like a thunderbolt out of the darkness. Pistol shots popped all over the fields outside the shanty. The brothers, awakened from slumber, sat up, listened, leaped out of their cots, groped for trousers and boots and fumbled on the shelf above the stove for their revolvers.

"What is it?" wondered Jim.

"I don't know," admitted Jack. "Could someone be killin' our cattle? Funny shots, those. Muffled. Notice?"

Jim grasped his pistol, strode to the door, pulled it open and walked outside.

"Whoa!" pleaded Jack. "Go slow!"

"You watch the house," advised Jim. "I've had enough of this!"

He stepped on soft earth, bumped into a cotton-wood tree, caromed away, stuck his cowhide boots into oozy grass which

smelt of water, went around the marsh and the waterhole, and started northward because the majority of the shots were heard from that direction. Most of the fifty thoroughbred cattle happened to be grazing in that northern pasture. An ominous coincidence.

Horsemen were moving there. He recognized the faint thumping of hoofs, the jingling of bit chains and the creaking of leather. He squirmed under a barbed wire fence, hastening through sage and grass before he halted to get his bearings.

A flare and a thud at his right revealed the dim outline of a beef animal. The shot was delivered at such close range that the noise was muffled. The animal grunted, hitting the ground like a ton of brick.

The sneakiness of the slaughter caused the wrathful Vail to swing up his .45, sending two thundering streaks of lead toward the vicinity of the fallen cow.

A scandalized bass voice bawled at him:

"Hey! Quit that! You fool, stick your gun up against their ribs! Are you tryin' to kill me?"

"You bet I am!" Vail fired passionately toward the voice, which began to roar sudden instructions all over the field:

"Hey! Hey! Scatter, boys, scatter! They've waked up. Hit for home!"

Vail charged toward that bellowing voice, holding his six-shooter ready; but the ground was uneven and the sky was so overhung with clouds that the blackness of the night was absolute, causing him to wobble with every step. He tripped over the dead cow, raised himself by pushing a hand against the warm flank and tried to estimate the direction of the furtive noises in front of him; but the sounds were confusing. He tried another shot for luck.

A yellow flare spat at him from an unexpected quarter.

He fired at the flash. He fired again until his pistol was empty.

Nobody replied. Instead he heard the stamping of an excited horse; the sound of a man landing in a saddle; the jingling of loose spurs; the galloping of another horse from a different direction, and then another, and some more. Then came the pattering of departing hoofs which faded away into the distance until the place was silent as a graveyard.

It was as if ghosts had swept through the field.

Vail floundered around with no results except to stumble upon two dead animals, so he gave it up and returned moodily toward the house. As he went along, his ears became increasingly aware of the sounds of conflict inside the board walls. The building was rocking and thumping as if two bulls were struggling there. The shelf of dishes above the stove crashed down. The stovepipe came loose, rattling along the floor as it burst into sections.

Vail commenced to run.

"Hold him!" he pleaded.

He lurched up to the open doorway but the pandemonium made him hesitate. He couldn't tell friend from foe. Everything in the house seemed to be whirling around while the panting combatants bumped into chairs, tables and beds. Then the stove overturned, glass tinkled, and Jim heard a despairing cry from his brother:

"He's goin' through the window!"

Jim rushed around the corner of the house but a packing box tripped him and some loose boards and barrel hoops entangled him. He heard a heavy object drop from the window, running around the other corner before he could disengage himself.

"Why don't you shoot?" wailed the brother in the house.

"No cartridges," retorted Jim. "Why didn't you?"

"I laid my gun aside." Jack Vail was heard fumbling through the wreckage till the yellow light of a candle shone out of the door and window. "Come in! Look at the place!"

Jim unwisely stepped into the ruined place, holding the empty pistol. The two half-clad brothers gazed at each other over the wreck of a table lying sideways.

"Who was it?" wondered Jim.

"I don't know." Jack was sobbing. "He stumbled into the house. Accident, maybe. I couldn't hold him. Too powerful. He tried to shoot me but his pistol clicked. These people mean murder!"

Jim's voice became truculent.

"We can't be idle, then. I'll telephone the sheriff in the morning from the big house over the hill."

"Keep away from that house," pleaded Jack, desperately. "Dammit, that's the cause of all our trouble— Look out! Look out!"

An unseen hammer struck the wooden

wall board beyond the stove, just above Jim's head, causing the board to tremble under the shattering impact. A big round hole appeared in the wood.

Jim ducked. Jack blew out the light. In darkness Jim fumbled for his brother's pistol, found it, and went out of the doorway again, swearing.

"Wait!" implored the older brother.

But only silence answered him.

V

JIM was still wandering around the fields when dawn came, but there was nothing else there except white-faced Hereford cattle grazing peacefully in long grass, near the lumpish red and white carcasses of animals which would never graze again.

Jim, pistol in hand, at last returned wearily homeward past the plowed ground and the truck gardens and the little stream and waterhole which reflected the budding leaves of a dozen cottonwood trees above them. Jack met him at the doorway, haggard but fully dressed. He had tidied the house somewhat. Jim grinned ruefully as he saw it.

"Seventeen animals dead," he reported.

"The fences are cut in a dozen places. The raiders came and went in every direction. Clever. Wherever they left tracks, the tracks are all muddled up by the marks of other hoofs crossing them. Every detail was planned out beforehand."

Jack's despondent blue eyes stared over the flat valley which reached to the bases of round yellow buttes to the northward. Those steep hills with their numerous dry cañons were also part of the Vail 640 acres, but the brothers had only fenced in the good green flat pasture land, about half the total acreage.

"Well," muttered Jack, "we can't afford much of this. We're nearly busted."

"All right. We'll stop it. Saddle my pony while I'm dressing, will you?"

"Where are you goin'?"

"Over the hill to the big house."

"No! No!" Jack clutched his shoulder with appealing hands. "Quit interferin' over there! My God, Jim, that's the cause of the whole trouble!"

Jim pulled away.

"Maybe. But now that I *have* interfered, I'll see it through."

"It's the girl," accused Jack.

"Yes. It's the girl."

Jack gulped.

"Jim! Jim, don't get us both into trouble like this. We've got our ranch; we've got our work. Why not let those people alone? They've got too much money for you. You're not in their class. Why do you have to dream about millionaires' daughters?"

"It's no dream," said Jim, tersely. "She's real."

"Yes. I know. I'm not criticizin' her, Jim; but why not lie low for a while?"

"Too late. Anyhow, they're neighbors and they're in trouble. Now we're in it. Let it go at that."

Jack shook his sorrowful head.

"It's the girl."

"Well, it certainly isn't her mother," agreed Jim, with a sudden grin. "Let it go at that!"

He was with the girl an hour later, after crossing the hills, without incident. He telephoned the sheriff at Meteor, thirty miles away, concerning the cattle raid and the mysterious marksman in the hills. Vail hung up the phone disappointedly.

"He says he's busy on other cases and will come when he can," reported Vail.

Aileen looked thoughtful. The light from the alcove window brought out the exquisite oval contour of her worried face.

"But don't tell mother about this," she warned him. "She'd disbelieve you or drown you with advice."

"I know. I'll take matters into my own hands. Here she comes now. We'll start it."

The dude rancheress glided in with stately tread from a rear room, raising her eyebrows at the visitor.

"You here again?"

"Yes. I've decided to take up your offer, Mrs. Jerdane," said Vail, with vast respect. "Conditions seem to justify it. You'd be surprised. I thought of your offer many times last night."

Which was true.

She was taken aback.

"Oh. Yes. Well—er—h'm. A little bit unexpected but quite timely. Very. Two ponies were missing this morning. Beautiful ponies. Quite expensive. H'm. Very well, then. You may consider yourself hired."

Vail held up a hand.

"One moment, Mrs. Jerdane. I must have full charge or I cannot accept your offer."

She stared at him.

"H'm. Must. Just how much authority *must* you have?"

"All of it, Mrs. Jerdane. If I am in charge, I am responsible. I cannot be responsible unless I am given full power."

"Not in my house, however. Hardly!"

"Certainly not," agreed Vail, irritated. "But otherwise I want a free hand. It's the only way."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Subject to daily reports, though," she suggested, too sweetly.

"If you wish, yes."

Nodding, she made a generous gesture with her hand, having thus arranged to heckle him daily.

"Very well, then. You are in charge." She strode to the telephone, calling up the foreman at the bunkhouse, advising him that Mr. Vail was the new superintendent. "And I am sure you will do everything in your power to carry out his wishes," she added, in honeyed tones. "Yes. Thank you. Good-by." She turned to Vail with an air of mastery. "Now, about your salary."

"We'll talk about that later, thanks. Time is the important thing. I'll start right now!"

He bowed politely to his blinking employer, glanced at the smiling Aileen, gave them no time to parley further, and marched out of the house and into the bunkhouse where three cowpunchers, colorful as easter eggs, jumped up from cots where they were reading newspapers. The hawk nosed foreman arose from his handsome desk at the end of the room, looking embarrassed. Vail wasted no time on formalities.

"How many men have you?"

"Fourteen. Nine here, five out on the range."

"Far?"

"No. Just below the hills to the southward. The main herd."

"Southward, eh? Call them in."

"What? You wouldn't leave the herd unguarded!"

"Call those men in!"

Vail turned his back, making for the door. Behind him came a muffled growl in the new Western veracular: "Some

guy oughta sock dat gink on the beezer." But Vail went outside, loafing around until couriers brought in the herders.

AS THEY arrived on their vivid pinto ponies, hung with ivory ringed martingales, braided ropes, and silvered dingbats, even Vail was impressed by their gorgeousness. Rampant colors galloped and turned around the front of the bunkhouse, making the yard look like a galaxy of moving rainbows; yet beneath all this outward splendor was an undercurrent of apprehension. Vail caught the suspicious glances from sharp eyes as the men dismounted.

He lined them up in front of the ranch-house, all fifteen of them, including Lin McChesney. Whimsically Vail longed for a color plate camera but he remembered his slaughtered cattle. His words were biting.

"All right. Now get out of here. You're fired!"

The jolt made the line quiver.

"Fired?" yelled the foreman. "What for? And who's goin' to guard the southern herd?"

"Not you," retorted Vail. "It might as well go unguarded as to have you!" He swung down his right hand, pulling back his coat, revealing the butt of a heavy gun in a holster at his hip. "Now, you burglars, pack up and move! You're going to get clear out of the country. It's safest. I'm doing this in self-defense, if it makes any of you happier to know it. If I see any of you around here by noon, I'll arrest him and turn him over to the sheriff for robbery—and I've got proof." This was a bluff but the rest was not. "If any of you object, step right up!"

There was silence. Lin McChesney's high heeled boots moved forward but hesitated. Vail did not give him a glance. He did not dare.

"All right," said Vail. "I've phoned for the sheriff already. Now, move!"

The crowd stood together in a solid line. Sullen eyes looked into Vail's. For an instant he expected real trouble. His hand went toward his hip again. Then the crowd began to waver. A man glanced at him. Someone muttered. Suddenly the men broke, turned their backs upon him, hunched their shoulders, and shambled away toward the bunkhouse.

Vail waited till they were all crowding up the steps. Then he smiled grimly.

"Checkmate!" he exulted, under his breath; but he did not know what was coming.

VI

GIVING his rogues no time to concoct any new plots, Vail hustled them into an elderly motor truck in which they started toward town. He suspected they would sell the truck but he believed the ranch was well rid of them at any price, so he sent them along the southern road until the jeering, hooting mob of noisy, but strangely unresisting, gangsters was well out of sight beyond the herd of red cattle which began to scatter all over the plain. Vail watched the men narrowly but couldn't see the slightest sign of active rebellion, which began to worry him.

Lin McChesney, whose left eye stared out from a beautiful purple circle, went along with the crowd. Vail could only whisper a word into his ear while the others were stripping off the expensive angoras from their lower limbs.

"You're fired, too," said Vail. "Otherwise they might bushwack you. Go to town and then come back later. I need you."

McChesney nodded, joining his companions on the outward trail.

Vail followed alertly on horseback until the last speck of their dust vanished on the southern horizon, early in the afternoon. Then he returned to the ranch-house to make his first official report. The dude rancheress was at her desk. Her portable typewriter was tapping out the finishing touches on "Rancho Hidalgo—A New Mexican Paradise," which some Eastern home and garden magazine had inquired about.

Hat in hand, wearing his coat, the tired, unshaven Vail presented himself in newly cleaned boots on the great red Navajo rug. The dude rancheress's spectacles glinted up at him inquiringly.

"The trouble's all cured," he reported.

"All cured?" She pushed the typewriter away.

"Yes. I've fired everybody."

She came to attention, inch by inch.

"You have *what*?"

"Fired everybody, Mrs. Jerdane. You expected it, didn't you?"

Thunders and lightnings began to gather in the air, but suddenly it turned icy. Not that she condoned robbery but that her nature was outraged by this audacity from a subordinate.

"Not, quite, Mister Vail. Humph! I didn't anticipate anything as drastic as *that*. Hardly! I might suggest that you change your mind right away."

"I can't. They've gone."

"Where?"

"Southward. Thirty miles an hour. That was about two hours ago."

The lady's lips tightened. Deliberately she yanked the manuscript out of her machine and slammed down the cover before she sat back in her swivel-chair, folding her arms. Her voice was a flutelike tremolo.

"And what, pray, are your further intentions concerning my property?"

"None. I've stopped the stealing, that's all. Wasn't that what you wanted, Mrs. Jerdane?"

"Yes. Certainly. However, have you paused to consider that your wholesale action may have been frightfully unjust to those of *my boys* who were innocent?"

"Well, I don't think there's much danger there."

Her retort was sweet as arsenic.

"No? Did you happen to know that I selected these boys myself from all parts of the Southwest? Is my judgment so deficient, then, that *all* were dishonest?"

"No, no, Mrs. Jerdane. Of course not. Not originally. It's like a barrel of apples. The rotten ones made the other ones rotten. Some of 'em were—er—weak, and the pickings were too—I mean, they couldn't stand temptation."

She stared at him until a petulant frown creased her brows. She slammed a fist on the desk.

"Why didn't someone telephone me? Why didn't someone tell me that this was going on?"

"I wouldn't let 'em," retorted Vail, reddening in spite of his intention to keep his temper.

She replied with sweet sarcasm.

"Oh. Then I presume you have further plans for my benefit, have you not? You wouldn't strip my ranch of its men merely to render me helpless, I hope?"

That was wanton meanness, but he controlled himself.

"No, Mrs. Jerdane. I expect to get a new crew in town tonight."

"Pray do." To his surprise she did not again demand the return of her burglars. She was more concerned with putting her new superintendent in his place. She really didn't understand him. "I certainly hope you will be able to do so," she added. "Otherwise I will have to discharge you."

Whimsically Vail thought of the *Queen* in "Alice in Wonderland." "Off with his head!" But his demeanor was very respectful.

"I shall carry out your orders, Mrs. Jerdane."

"See that you do. Who is guarding the range?"

"Nobody just now."

"Nobody?" She jumped.

"No, but it's quickly cured."

She pondered, knit her brows, made her decisions, and arose, grasping some paper for her typewriter.

"Very well, Mister Vail," she announced coldly. "You will have your way—*this time*. But if anything goes wrong I will know who to blame and I shall take steps accordingly. You understand, Mister Vail? Yes. Thank you. Very well, then. That is all."

He bowed and departed. Aileen, in natty tan riding togs, met him as he marched stiffly down the arched hallway leading to the outer door.

"I heard some of it," she confessed, with lips twitching. "You look as if you've suffered!"

His body was hot and his forehead was beady with perspiration.

"I couldn't stand many séances like that," he admitted.

She laughed.

"Mother's annoying but she's kind-hearted, really. She just likes to be boss, that's all. Don't let it exasperate you, Jim."

He grasped her shoulders, drawing her close. His eyes lost their hunted expression as they gazed into hers, as if he was seeing something soothing and sensible in the midst of all his vexations. If she snuggled to his faded blue chest there was nothing either flirtatious or coy about it. He was her man.

"I guess I'll have to stay as superintendent," he teased, with a smile. "Maybe

it's better than being the poor husband of a wealthy wife, at that."

"Jim!"

He looked worried again. This was another of his problems.

"Well, anyhow, I don't dare tell your mother I want her daughter! Not now, anyhow. I haven't got the nerve. I'll have to postpone it till I'm fired, or something. Now I'm only the hired help!"

She laughed, straightening a forelock of his tousled hair.

"What are your plans for the present?" she asked. "Are you going to town?"

"Yes. I must get a new crew."

"Can I do anything to help?"

His face became utterly serious.

"Yes. Watch things. Stay at the house but watch the southern herd, watch the hills, watch everything. Use field glasses. I won't leave you unprotected very long. I'll send my brother over."

But brother refused to go. Brother, after some slow but logical thinking, had arrived at one of those shrewdly stubborn conclusions which farmer-folk are apt to acquire.

"No," said the tiller of the soil, working at a grindstone in his deliberate way. "It's bad enough to have one of us interferin' yonder. Besides, who'll guard our place?"

"I don't think it's necessary now," argued Jim.

Jack was sharpening an ax. He examined the gleaming edge carefully.

"Well, if you've chased the rogues away, 'tain't necessary to guard those folks."

"But, Jack——"

"Nope. If you've cleaned out the crooks, then everybody's safe. If you haven't cleaned 'em out, then I'd better stay here!"

"But, Jack——"

"Nope. I've made up my mind!"

Jim sighed. In the face of such stubborn logic he was beaten. Besides, he knew Jack's tenacity. Slowly he walked over to a rusty flivver behind the house, cranked it and climbed into the seat.

"Where you goin'?" demanded Jack, as the flivver clattered into sight around the corner.

"I'm going to get help!" shouted Jim. "If the crooks happened to come back—then what?"

Jack nodded wisely.

"Then I'll be right here!"

The flivver bounced away at top speed. There was something vehement about it.

VII

VAIL'S hot flivver raced down into the lower cañon, drawing up under trees which threw their deep shade upon the front of the old Roberts' ranch-house, whose ramshackle wooden porch overlooked a tract of bare ground decorated with a few sun rotted boxes and some well polished old dog bones which were constantly inspected by white chickens.

Dogs barked wildly at the rear of the house. The screen door at the front creaked open. Parson Roberts, gaunt, stoop shouldered and gray mustached, in wrinkled old brown clothes, shambled out into the sunlight to welcome the visitor. Roberts' face was benign but his eyes seemed weary and mournful, as if he suffered from physical troubles. He came down the porch heavily.

"What brings you here?" he asked, holding out a hand. Then: "You look sort o' vexed."

"I am," admitted Vail. "Things have gone wrong. Can you spare a man or two to guard Rancho Hidalgo for a while?"

"The dude ranch? Why? Anything the matter?"

"Yes. I fired the whole crew, leaving the women unprotected. I had to."

"Too bad." Roberts fingered his stubbly gray chin, looking uncertainly toward his barn and corral as if hoping to see some of his hard working riders; but nobody was in sight. Roberts shook his head slowly. "No. No. I'm sorry. The men are all away. I've got to go, too, right soon. It's springtime."

Vail nodded.

"I see. Then I'll have to ride fast."

"Is it that bad?"

"Worse. They've raided my cattle and even tried to murder me."

Roberts stared at him blankly.

"My God!" Then querulously: "Why didn't you come to me about it? I've heard there was trouble over there, and I've sort o' wondered. Did—did you suspect me of it?"

"No. You're not that sort, even if you do want my ranch."

The reminder brought a slow smile to Roberts' wrinkled face.

"I appreciate that. Yeh. As for wantin' your ranch, I still want it. My offer still stands. Of course, I was annoyed when you boys filed on that valley which we'd used as a sort o' backyard pasture for twenty years. We forgot it was Government land and we never foresaw anybody would take it. But that was our own fault, and I don't blame you. We're lucky to get such good neighbors. Still, I'm ready to buy. I'm willin' to be right liberal. Fact is, I need that land."

Vail shook his head.

"But if you're in trouble, it might be a good way to get rid of it by sellin' out," argued the old man.

Vail shook his head again. Roberts laid a hand on his shoulder. The hand trembled with eagerness.

"Sell out, boy. I've asked you ten times. I'm askin' again."

"No."

"Take up my offer. Save yourself a lot o' grief. Somebody's got it in for you. Better get out from under."

"No."

"Boy, take my advice. Maybe you're in bigger danger than you know."

Vail stepped backward, eying him.

"What do you mean by that?"

The old man frowned uncertainly at his gnarled hands.

"Well, I've heard rumors, that's all. Somebody's tryin' to trap you."

"Have you any information that I haven't got?"

The old man shook his head.

"Rumors. Talk," he grunted. "You've got a mystery. I can see that. Still, I—I don't want you to think that I'm behind it, or that I'm tryin' to scare you into sellin' your ranch. Not exactly. No. I'm just advisin' you."

Vail, seeking a false note in the gentle old fellow's voice, stared at him with suspicious eyes.

"Have I been on the wrong trail?" blurted Vail.

"Eh?"

"I mean, is there something around here that I haven't suspected? Have all my ideas about the dude ranch been wrong? Have all my troubles been from another quarter?"

Roberts' eyes were sorrowful and quite pathetic.

"How do you mean that?" he asked.

"Well, for instance, have some of your riders got out of hand? Are *they* my secret attackers? Is that it?"

Roberts shook his head.

"No, it's not my riders. I can promise that. I see 'em day and night. You needn't worry about *them*. Not a-tall."

"I apologize," said Vail.

"It's all right. Still, I'd like to buy your ranch, boy."

But Vail refused to parley further, though he went onward with the feeling that *here* was one neighbor, at least, who could never give him trouble.

TWO hours later he arrived in town, watching vigilantly lest he stumble across one of his ex-burglars who might be vengeful; but none appeared. He parked his flivver in front of the great rambling structure known as O'Brien's Pool Hall, one of the establishments which had taken the place of the old-time saloon as a rendezvous for the livelier citizens. By dusk he had hired three men. Then he ate supper in a white tiled restaurant which would have done credit to New York, returning to the pool hall in search of more men.

The place was now crowded. The numerous green tables, under their bright electric lights, were all in use. The smoke filled air resounded with the click of colorful ivory balls. An automatic piano jangled "Rose Marie." Players whistled it.

Spectators in a solid row were seated in front of the walls. Others stood ahead of them. Another mob stayed near the bar at the front of the place, drinking soft stuff or shaking for cigars, though many souses were present to prove that somewhere in town there was plenty of liquor.

Vail joined the crowd watching the pool players, looking around for likely candidates. Like the dude rancheress he judged men first by their faces, but he sought pleasant looking fellows who were at peace with themselves, and then followed up with shrewd questions about their capabilities. He had rushed his three new employees upcountry via the direct road to the dude ranch, in the truck which he discovered miraculously in a second hand place where his ex-burglars had stored it. He intended that the presence of the new men should protect the dude ranch as quickly as

possible. He would have staked his life on these men. Now he sought more of that sort.

Strolling around the big hall, watching faces, he came suddenly upon a group of his ex-burglars, sitting along the rear wall, sending covert glances toward him. One or two whispered from the corners of their mouths. One laughed. For an instant he expected trouble, but they looked away, ignoring him.

Through the haze of smoke came the cocky Lin McChesney, smoking a cigaret, reeling slightly as he caromed off an irritated pool player. His hat was crammed forward over his left forehead and he exuded an air of truculence while mumbling the song which was partially drowned by the click of billiard balls.

*"Rose Marie I love yuh,
I'm always dreamin' of yuh. . . ."*

He caught sight of Vail. His moon face paled slightly and he leaned against a green table, staring for a moment until he turned away and rejected Vail with a sarcastic gesture toward the grinning ex-burglars.

"To hell with him!"

They laughed.

It encouraged McChesney, so he made a backward wave of his hand toward Vail.

"Too high hat. Too damned high hat. And what about? I wanna know. What about?"

There was silence from the crowd.

"Because he kotows to a cacklin' old hen with a big bank roll, that's why. Hell, that ain't nothin' to get high hat about. Is it?"

The crowd guffawed while Vail grew red faced, despite his secret amusement.

"Any fool can stand around and get henpecked," orated McChesney. "Any fool can wear poodle clothes and read the 'Rules and Regulations' in the bunkhouse. But hell, that ain't no way to be a cowboy!" McChesney gave a grandiloquent gesture toward Vail. "To hell with him! To hell with the old hen! Me for *independence!*" McChesney imitated the sirupy voice of the dude rancheress as he held up a warning finger toward them:

"Now, my dear boys, mamma is goin' to see that you behave like real nice little saps, and don't you dare to say nothin' nasty about them damned poodle clothes

or mamma will tie a can to you. Now, go back to the bunkhouse like good little boys, and study the 'Rules and Regulations' real nice, and mamma will send you some cream puffs from the kitchen. But if any of you damned fools think you want to start something——"

It was such a ribald bit of sarcasm, such a scandalously profane caricature of a very estimable lady, that Vail felt almost compelled to intervene. Yet that would have been foolish, so Vail got away from there swiftly, leaving McChesney to his own woozy plans, whatever they were. McChesney had not winked; that would have been coarse work. But Vail suspected that McChesney was play-acting, and overdoing it. Probably he was trying a little detective-work, to see which of these burglars was the deadly one. . . .

VAIL ambled toward the bar, going through the crowd which was scattering loosely all over the front of the place. He asked a white aproned soda clerk for some soft stuff and then, glass in hand, he turned to watch the crowd of ranchers, politicians, miners, merchants and loafers who made this their meeting place.

A great tawny face with a dirty golden beard confronted him. A pair of savagely malicious blue eyes leered into his. A powerful body, in corduroys and cowhide boots, leaned toward him. His nostrils became conscious of a sour smell, an odor of sweat, whisky and stable filth which emanated from the man like the atmosphere of a dirty sewer.

The giant insinuated his face closer, breathing a heavy blast of stale tobacco and alcohol.

"You're Vail, eh?" bawled the big fellow, with mock heartiness. "You're Vail, eh?"

Vail cocked his head. He had heard that bass voice before.

"What of it?" he asked, becoming tense.

The man grinned, showing yellow teeth. His thick forefinger curled under Vail's necktie, pulling it out. It looked playful but it was deliberately provocative. The man guffawed, causing several near-by persons to become interested onlookers. Vail, reddening, returned the tie into place but did nothing more.

Again the pudgy forefinger curled under it, yanking it out.

"That's enough!" commanded Vail, stiffly, trying to shove the fellow away.

The giant laughed. With assumed playfulness his rough hands closed down upon Vail's cheeks, shoving his head back and then shaking it briskly from side to side while the reeking corduroy clad body pinned him against the bar.

"Stop that!" yelled Vail.

The big fellow laughed with his mouth, but his eyes were cruel, though he spoke in bantering tones for the benefit of the audience:

"Don't get mad, now. Thass no way to play. We're playin', ain't we? Yeh. Sure. You don't wanna be a short sport and get mad when we're just playin'. Sure not." His mighty thumbs crawled down to Vail's neck, pressing against sensitive nerves, causing Vail almost to yell with agony. "It's just play, ain't it? Wadda you wanna get mad for? Be a man!"

"Let go of me!" shouted the maddened Vail, trying to writhe away.

A powerful thrust of the big hands nearly wrenched his neck off its foundation.

"Aw, now, what's the use of gettin' mad? Be a sport. It's just play, ain't it?" The man pulled Vail's ears and ran a hand over his cheek. The heavy callouses cut into the flesh like sandpaper. "Just play, thass all. Yeh. Havin' fun!"

Through all his frantic pains, Vail saw that the fellow was deliberately leading up to a fight but first was making his victim helpless. Three of the spectators backed away, suspecting that this wasn't as funny as it looked; but the rest of the big crowd laughed innocently as they saw a big fellow harmlessly heckling a smaller one. Vail, with his brain reeling, tried to squirm away. The giant laughed again, twisting his neck. With a stifled cry, Vail tried to lash out with his fists, but the man's body was too close.

Yet the fellow felt the blows, and that was what he wanted. He backed away, affecting surprise.

"Well! Gettin' mad? You won't play, eh? Gettin' mad at a little fun? All right. You wanna get nasty, eh? All right, then; le's fight! Come on! Le's fight!"

Vail, panting, stared at the man, wondering what his program was. Then in desperation Vail's right hand went toward his hip.

The giant saw it. His eyes widened with

alarm, for he hadn't foreseen this. Perhaps he had expected Vail to be unarmed, like most of the other people in the poolroom. Perhaps he had hoped to torment Vail and then finish him later. Nobody ever knew. Yet as he saw Vail's gesture, his own hand went downward.

Both their weapons flashed out at the same instant. Neither of them were swift; neither were experts at the draw. Yet before the horrified spectators could back away, they had pressed their pistol muzzles against each other's hearts.

"Hey!" screamed a blond soda clerk.

But that was the only sound except the quick indrawing of a dozen breaths, though Vail and the giant had stopped breathing.

Eye to eye, body to body, they stood white faced and motionless, holding loaded pistols, in that ominous moment before both of them would be blown into eternity. Yet in that swift, silent instant of suspense at the brink of oblivion, their eyes flashed messages though their parted lips did not. It was as if two souls, stark naked, challenged each other; one of them resolute and the other suddenly not so resolute. It was only a flash of time; the short interval when finger muscles were tightening upon triggers; yet in that supreme instant, the giant's eyes became glazed as his hand unconsciously relaxed its grip. Two agonized globules of sweat rolled down his forehead and down over his eyebrows, causing him to blink with watery eyes.

"Down!" whispered Vail.

The giant's hand wavered. It opened. The pistol fell out of his nerveless grasp. He caught a great sobbing breath, staggering back against a white faced spectator.

"Bluffed out!" yelled someone.

It sounded like a thunderclap but the trembling Vail hardly heard it. A great nausea had seized him. It took all his will power to hold the pistol, and it took a mighty self-control not to press the trigger; but he held it straight toward the corduroy figure which, through a blur, he saw staggering back into the crowd.

An important man in black came showing along through the nearest men.

"Hey!" he roared. "Cut out that Wild West stuff! Drop that gun! Where do you think you are?"

It was the brawny town constable, a capable official who grasped Vail's wrist pulling it down while taking the pistol out

of his unresisting hand. Then the constable barked at him and the crowd:

"What's this about? Who was this bird goin' to shoot?"

The crowd wavered, saying nothing.

Vail mopped his forehead with a red bandanna in a quivering hand, feeling as if all his vitality had been burned out in that fierce electrical moment when two wills had clashed at the brink of death. A terrific reaction gripped him. He had read many times of persons who used pistols unemotionally. *Bang, bang, bang!* Three redskins bit the dust. But now he suspected that there was something inhuman and almost incredible about such deeds. He, personally, was so shaken that the constable had to roar at him twice before he came to attention:

"Well? Well? Speak up!"

"I don't know," protested Vail, leaning against the bar for support. "This fellow attacked me. I don't know why. Funny. I'm sort of sick. We had our pistols against each other . . . I'm not sure yet that I'm actually here. I saw the same thing once in the movie, the 'Four Horsemen', where Valentino and the German soldier found themselves with pistols against each other's heads, between the trench lines. They had to pull triggers. There wasn't anything else they could do . . . And, still, I'm here. Queer. But who is that fellow?"

"What fellow?" barked the constable, whirling around. "Who were you fightin'? What was it about? Where is he?"

But the giant had gone.

VIII

VAIL passed a hectic evening, getting out of trouble with the constable for carrying concealed weapons, searching for his gigantic enemy, looking for new employees, keeping away from Lin McChesney and his ex-burglars, and finally tumbling exhausted into a bed in the clean little hotel, where he slept until sunrise. Incidentally he had a talk with the sheriff at the county jail, but that official could promise no immediate help.

"Besides," said the stout sheriff, "you've kicked these here bums out of your country, and chances are that things will settle down."

"Have you any prison records against them?" inquired Vail.

"Nope, but I'll look 'em up. I'll watch 'em while they're in town, and maybe I'll learn who killed your cattle."

"Yes, but who was the big fellow who tried to pick a fight with me?"

"Don't know," admitted the sheriff. "Never heard of him. I'll try to find out who he is."

So that was that. Vail was baffled, but early next morning he met four well recommended young fellows who needed a job, so he rented a touring car and sent them upcountry to the dude ranch. That made seven good men. Lin McChesney would be the eighth. That was plenty, so Vail cranked up his flivver and started back toward his own ranch.

Despite the bumpy condition of the old road, his spirits rose, for springtime had thrown its beauty on the land. Cool sunlight gleamed on wild flowers and fresh grass growing on hillsides which would soon be hot and dismal. Even the sagebrush seemed to have a deeper shade of green, as the flivver rattled through gulch after gulch, valley after valley, coming at last into the great broad plain which narrowed into the cañon where the Roberts ranch-house stood.

The house was deserted except for a few barking dogs. Vail expected that, having seen the Roberts riders herding their fat cattle on the plain, so he went past with hardly a glance at the place. Then he emerged from the cañon into his own sunny green valley, with the shanty under the cottonwoods beyond the nearer fields.

Something was amiss over there.

At first he was too far away to distinguish the details, yet as he came nearer he observed a peculiar outline to the yellow boards of the structure. Soon he began to notice streaky black marks on the boards. Then he saw a horse tied to a tree near the spring, though there was no other sign of life about the building.

He pulled the throttle wide open. The flivver rushed along the seldom used roadway like a bouncing comet, shimmying up to the house, where it turned on one wheel as Vail arose to leap out, holding a hand cautiously near his pistol butt.

A boyish figure in khaki riding togs and polished tan boots appeared in the shadowed doorway.

"Aileen!" exclaimed Vail, jumping to the ground. "You here? What's it about?"

She ran to him, holding out both hands. Her eyes were relieved at sight of him but her face was tired.

"Jim, I've been waiting for you! Four hours! Thank heaven it's over! Jack's inside——"

"Four hours? Jack?" He gazed in consternation at the boards of the house, which were charred at the corners. "Holy smoke, what now?"

"They attacked him at dawn."

"Who attacked him?"

"Nobody knows."

"Well, how did you get here?"

"Well, you told me to watch things, didn't you?"

He frowned quizzically as he looked into her frank blue eyes.

"Watch things at home, I meant," he explained, "not travel over a range of hills into another country. You shouldn't have risked yourself, Aileen. You probably rode straight into danger. But what happened?"

"Come in," she urged him.

SHE grasped his arm and he accompanied her through the doorway. The shanty smelt of charred wood. Burned boards and household utensils littered the floor. In a cot lay Jack, with his head bandaged and his eyes closed. On the clean pillow under his left ear was a trace of blood. On a chair near by was torn linen, red rags, a bucket of reddish water, some absorbent cotton, scissors, and a bottle with a mild solution of carbolic acid.

Vail's grayish eyes looked up approvingly at Aileen as he nodded.

"He had a good nurse, anyhow. I'm thankful." Then, to the pale, unshaven Jack, whose eyes were opening: "What happened, old boy? Did they sneak up on you when you weren't looking?"

Aileen's gentle hand went across Jack's mouth.

"Ss-h! Let me talk. I'm glad to. I've had four hours alone, waiting for someone to come, and praying that it wouldn't be the wrong sort of people. It's been misery. Not the work but the waiting."

"I understand." Vail nodded. "How badly is he hurt?"

"I don't know. His ear is nearly torn off. There's a bullet in his side and two in the thigh. They nearly murdered him."

She shuddered. "It's an atrocious thing. I can't understand it! You'll have to go for a doctor, Jim, and then we'll take him to our place."

"We can't. There's no road over the hills."

She sat on a chair alongside the one with the bandages.

"Very well," she yielded. "But you should go for a doctor immediately."

Vail looked miserably out of the doorway toward the green fields and the road past the spring.

"I've got to," he admitted. "We must all go, though the flivver's hard on a wounded man. I couldn't leave you here, that's certain. Damn it, who are these scoundrels? What are they trying to do? What's their object? How long is this going to last?" He started pacing up and down, but controlled his rising voice as he seated himself on a corner of the stove. "Tell me about it, Aileen. From first to last."

"I know very little more than you do," she confessed. "I tried to stand guard in our house yesterday, but mother began to get nervous, herself, until things became so fidgety that I saddled my pony to scout around."

Vail noticed how she had prepared herself for the job. Her boyish riding outfit was very sensible. A red bandanna was slung under her throat to keep the dust from her collar. It wasn't tied tenderfoot fashion, in a bow in front, but was knotted loosely at the back of the neck, flowing down in front like a bib. He wondered where she had learned that. Not from mother, probably. Then the tan Stetson was held in place by a chin strap. Alongside the saddle of her horse, outside, a .30-30 rifle was tucked into an old leather holster so that the butt could be grasped in an instant. Aileen's preparations had been quite wise.

"At dusk I rode into the hills," she reported. "I noticed two men on horseback—strange men—lurking along the inner side of the range near your ranch, so I decided to retreat to my own place before I should happen to run into them. I mistrusted them."

Vail nodded.

"You were right. What then?"

"I barred all the doors of Rancho Hidalgo. Mother became quite upset, and

then she went to bed." Aileen smiled wanly. "She spoke a few opinions about people who left two poor women defenseless, but I'd better not go into that."

"No," pleaded Vail. "I'll get that when I go back!"

"Oh, yes. Plenty. Well, after mother went to bed, I patrolled the house, but the place can be frightfully spooky when it wants to be. It's the echoing halls and the arched ceilings. Then at nine o'clock some men came in a car and hammered at the gates. It scared us terribly but I found a pistol and then I talked down to them from the porch. They were the three new men you had sent us. Mother commanded them to go away but I told them to patrol the place as best they could. So they did."

Vail chuckled. Aileen continued:

"Then I went to sleep. But before dawn I was up. I made the cook get breakfast for the new men, but I was still thinking about those two strangers I had seen in the hills. I grew curious about them. So I saddled my pony and rode toward your place again. Your new men were still guarding Rancho Hidalgo, and they looked like decent fellows, so I knew I could ride back to safety."

"But it was dangerous," objected Vail.

"Well, I came across the hills very cautiously, watching for the men, but they were not there. Then I came to a knoll where I could look down on your little shanty. There was smoke rising from the other side of it. It was on fire. There seemed to be confusion. Some sort of a fight. Then two men—the same two—came running around from the eastern side of the house, jumping on their horses and galloping eastward as fast as possible."

"Eastward?" asked Vail.

"Yes. Across the fields and into the far hills. I didn't know whether to come on or return home. I was a little bit frightened, but the place was still afire, so I felt I'd be needed."

Vail laid a hand on her shoulder, patting it gently.

"Frightened; but you felt you would be needed. That's real courage. Go on, Aileen. You're telling me a lot."

"I saw water splash over the roof upon the fire. Someone was using a bucket. Then Jack reeled around the corner, still holding the bucket; but he didn't have the

strength to reach the spring. He tried and fell, tried and fell. I raced my horse right down to the house. I threw four buckets of water on the fire, and then I dragged Jack inside. I've been here ever since."

Vail whistled. He looked at Jack, who managed to nod at him. Vail hardly recognized his own voice when he spoke again.

"Who was it, Jack? Did they give you any chance?"

Jack's labored reply came from under the great bandage:

"No. Sleepin'. Three shots through the window—sudden. I grabbed my gun—shot at them. They yelled and ducked. Hit me again through the boards. My side. Then I smelt fire."

"Savages!"

"I crawled to the window—fired fast. They shot at me and then ran away. Scared, maybe. I don't know. I fell back. But the place was on fire. Not much—but dangerous. So I stopped it with the two buckets in the house—till Aileen came." Jack drew a gasping breath. "That's all."

Vail's shoulders were hunched forward dejectedly as he looked past Aileen toward the doorway.

"Of all the cold-blooded, half-witted attempts on the lives of peaceful homesteaders, this is the limit! One thing I know: They're not real gunmen or real desperadoes; they haven't the guts to follow out their plans to a finish when they meet opposition; but they seem determined to get us out of here at any cost, even murder. It looks like the work of sneaks; stupid sneaks with a very definite object but only a hazy idea of how to go about it. I believe they wanted to kill Jack and then burn down the house to hide the evidence. A wild eyed plan, badly carried out; but they'll try again. I'm certain of it. And I thought we were rid of those fellows . . . Hello! What's this coming? A big open Cadillac. Lin McChesney and another fellow! What now?"

THE heavy car—probably a rented one—came rolling grandly up to the doorway. Vail went outside to meet it. McChesney, with the usual cigaret in the corner of his mouth, descended from his automobile as he waved a hand toward the other man, who stayed at the wheel.

"I picked him up in town," explained McChesney, whose jag had disappeared beautifully. "He's from Albuquerque, all same me. Good rider, wants a job. I hired him for the dude ranch. They make good men in Albuquerque. You'll need him."

Vail nodded cautiously. McChesney took the cigaret from his mouth and placed it over his right ear.

"But that's not what I came in such a hurry for," he added. "I came to tell you that you and me have been a couple of damned fools."

Vail smiled at him.

"Well, you could have told me that in a Ford, just as well. Why hire a Cadillac?"

"So I could bring the news quicker. You see, you've been pickin' on a lot o' poor, defenseless yeggs and burglars who only wanted to lift a few things lyin' around loose. No harm in any of 'em. Why, the poor discouraged rummies went East on the midnight rattler last night—there's another dude ranch cowboy word. 'Rattler' meanin' a train. A rattler used to mean somethin' else around here, so when they said they was goin' to jump a rattler at midnight, I thought they was gettin' desperate, especially when they said they were tired of life around here. But the thing passed off real tame, with the gang draped around the brake beams——"

"Quit it!" implored Vail.

"Oh. Yeh. You're right." McChesney's eyes wandered toward the burned wall boards of the shanty, as well as the girl in the doorway. He recognized Aileen, jerking the flopping brim of his hat. "It looks like trouble around here. What's those burned places?"

"Never mind them, Lin. Speak your piece."

"Oh. Well, I've learned exactly where all your grief comes from." He pointed down the field toward the Roberts ranch. "Right there. Old Roberts!"

"What? No!"

"You bet. That old hypocrite's stringin' you."

Vail caught a mental picture of the gentle, incompetent old man.

"That's impossible!" blurted Vail. "Impossible! I'd stake my life on him! Why, he's the pillar of the town church; one of the best neighbors a man ever had. Him crooked? If he is, then I'm a fool at reading character!"

"All right; you're elected," retorted McChesney. "I say he's a damned old fraud. Furthermore, he's hirin' men to down you."

"What?"

"You bet. I'm one of 'em."

"You are?"

"Well, almost. The burglars were sort o' peevish about you, so they spread the news about how rotten you were and how brave I was when I fought you. So about midnight last night, a young fellow with a queer white face—name unknown—came up to me and asked me what I really thought about you. I gave you hell, loud and long. Besides, I was soused. He seemed to like it—my line of bull, I mean—so he asked me if I'd consider some desperate work for good pay, quiet and private. I told him I was afraid it wouldn't be desperate enough, but he said it'd be plenty desperate because you were a tough guy. I told him I was willin' and ready to meet you any time, day or night—which was true—so he gave me a note to old Roberts and said I'd get instructions later about how to handle you. Here's the note. It says: 'This is a man we need.' Nothin' else. No signature or anything. Maybe I'm expected to do the dirty work while old Roberts and his gang sit tight and blame it on me afterward, eh?"

Vail looked blankly at the penciled scrawl. Aileen read it over his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," said Vail, sincerely, crumpling the note. "Mighty sorry." He stood looking at the ground. "Damned sorry!"

"Well? How about it?"

Vail came erect. He pointed to the man at the wheel of the big car.

"All right. You're hired. Your first job is to take my brother to a doctor. Lin, you help him."

"How about you?" demanded McChesney.

"I'm going to the Roberts ranch. Right now."

Aileen looked interested. She was now eager for adventure, keen to see the end of this business, now that she had participated in it; but Vail shook his head, pointing to the burned wall boards.

"You've seen enough," he suggested. "The thing's a little too sinister."

The reminder brought alarm to her eyes again. She stepped forward, grasping his arm.

"But you, Jim? Are you sure you won't be in trouble?"

"Nope," chirped McChesney. "He'll be with me!"

"Thanks, Lin," she acknowledged. "But Jim—please don't be rash! Don't get hurt!"

Vail turned away, shaking his head.

"Not me," he promised, looking at the far away ranch-house. "This time it's their turn!"

IX

TWENTY minutes later, the Cadillac and the flivver rolled up to the silent Roberts ranch-house. The Cadillac went onward toward the hospital with Jack and the new employee. Jim Vail and Lin McChesney abandoned their rickety conveyance, walking grimly over the leafy ground toward the porch. Lin McChesney chose this moment to bring forth his cigaret and light it again. Something seemed to be worrying him.

"This is my fight, remember," suggested Vail, slowing down for him. "Let me do the talking."

"It's likely to be anyone's fight before we're through," prophesied McChesney, breaking the burned match in his hand before he threw it away. "There's only one thing that bothers me."

"What's that?"

"Poodle clothes."

Vail could hardly believe his ears. He halted.

"Are you back on that subject again?"

"You bet I am. Summer's comin'. They're hotter'n hell. Besides, mama's pets don't get 'em dirty. I like the job. I'm hopin' to go back. But do I have to waddle around again like a circus cowboy with a load of fuzz around each leg?"

"That depends."

"Depends on the Old Girl? Well, I know the answer, then. I'm here to help you, but what do I get out of it? A chance to look like a doormat so's the house guests can gurgle about the lovely Western atmosphere around the Old Girl's ranch? Hell, that's no reward. Listen. You promise to let me live natural or I won't go one step further!"

Vail regarded him thoughtfully. It was a fool subject to bring up just now, but it was Lin McChesney's pet obsession.

"You've got me in a corner," admitted Vail.

"You bet I have. I've been waitin' for it. You're goin' to be up against a tough deal and I ain't aimin' to throw you down unless you get stubborn, but I want some sort o' guar'ntee right here and now!"

Vail looked grimly at the silent screen door. He darted ahead.

"You lose," he said, over his shoulder. "I'm not giving orders to Mrs. Jerdane. Nobody does. Still, I'm glad you've brought up the subject. This is my fight, Lin, and now you've put yourself out of it. Thanks. Just stay by the flivver, will you? If I have to leave this place in a hurry, I'll need a chauffeur!"

Walking away from the outraged McChesney, Vail went quickly up the three tottering steps to the porch, just as the screen door creaked open with old Roberts behind it. Roberts started to give a greeting but Vail's belligerency turned it into a throaty grumble.

Vail grasped the door, marching inside. He found himself in a stuffy living room, furnished with an old fashioned table, a red table cover, an aged blue carpet, a few chromos, faded red and yellow wallpaper which was peeling at the corners, some chairs, and a hair sofa alongside the base of an open stairway which led upward from the front door. Side doors in the room led toward a kitchen and a bedroom. Vail, with a quick glance around the place, took a chair at the other side of the room from the stairway.

"Sit down," he commanded.

Old Roberts blinked at him. The host's open hands, dangling at his sides, mutely registered dismay.

"Sit down, please," repeated Vail.

As if drawn by a magnet, the old man walked heavily to a chair, where his angular legs seemed to collapse under him. He slumped forward, crossing his arms on the table.

"Well?" he quavered, with a trace of indignation. "Isn't this—unusual?"

"You bet it's unusual," retorted Vail coldly. "Furthermore, it's likely to be final. Now, you damned old hypocrite, you crooked church member, you skulking old scoundrel, tell me what you know about the attacks on my ranch!"

Vail tried to be as nasty as possible, though he felt uncomfortably like a person

whipping a faithful old dog. Yet it brought results. To his amazement, the wrinkled face of Roberts turned stark white around the mouth while the sudden terror in his eyes was as plain as daylight.

Vail jumped up, kicking the chair away from him.

"I'm right!" he exclaimed. "I'm on the right trail at last!"

"Wait!" cried Roberts, holding up a hand.

Vail pointed an accusing finger.

"Wait, nothing! Talk up, you shoot-in-the-back artist, before I take it out of your hide!"

"No!" pleaded Roberts, as he struggled to his feet. "I—my God, don't be hard on me, Vail. You—you shouldn't accuse me like that!"

"Well, I *am* accusing you. I'm likely to accuse you to the whole county. I'll make it public!"

"No!"

"Certainly. You've shot my brother; killed my cattle; tried to kill me. Do you think I've got to stand for that?"

"No! I didn't!"

The old man mumbled the words, looking with glazed eyes at his accuser while his lower lip sagged downward, quivering piteously. Then his graying head went forward and buried itself in his folded arms on the table.

"My God!" he sobbed.

There was silence. A clock in the next room ticked loudly.

"Speak!" insisted Vail.

Old Roberts' muffled voice came from the table.

"I don't dare. I'd be—overheard."

"Overheard?" Vail's breath hissed inward. His glance flew to the top of the stairway. He became conscious that something was lurking up there, though it threw no shadow and made no noise. The thing gave him the crawling sensation of a person who had almost touched the head of a coiled snake.

"Oh," he observed. "A queer house. Something has you terrorized, eh?"

The old man echoed the word blankly.

"Terrorized? Terrorized?" His head began to come up. There was a puzzled expression on his face, as though he were emerging from a trance. "Why—you're right. I *am* terrorized. My God, I'm a scoundrel!"

Vail waited while the clock ticked on.

OLD ROBERTS' quavering jaw began to clamp. He seemed to be getting his wits. He commenced speaking slowly, with an undertone of defiance, though his eyes still regarded the red table cover.

"I can't go on like this. No. It's not possible. No. I've tried—tried to live honest—to keep my shame covered up—but this is the end of the trail. You have forced me into the open. I have not had the strength to fight this—this thing—alone. I have been helpless. Terrorized. You said it. But now, if there is anyone within the hearing of my voice who blames me, there can be nobody—*within the hearing of my voice*—who can expect me to go on longer with this—crime."

Vail's glance darted to the top of the stairs. Nothing happened. He waited. The clock ticked implacably. Then Roberts blurted:

"You filed on that six-forty above us. We didn't care much until we happened to go into the hills over there. We found copper ore. Rich. A whole hill of it."

"What?" gasped Vail.

"Yes. Green rock. Rich as Midas. Only a week ago. . . ."

Vail stood petrified. The news meant great good fortune or a menace to his ranch—he didn't know which.

"Go on," he invited, at last. "Why didn't you do something about it? Or tell me about it?"

"I started to, but things went wrong." The old man hesitated, licking his lips. "My son had come back from an Eastern penitentiary."

The room seemed to reel in front of Vail as he began to realize what he was up against.

"A criminal!" he gasped.

The old man bowed his head.

"A criminal. Yes. For twenty years I've tried and failed. Bad to worse. Hardened. Jail hardened, crime hardened—then drugs. Do you know what morphine can do to a soul already wayward? But never mind that!" Roberts' dull eyes were glistening.

"Go on," urged Vail gently.

The old man hesitated.

"Yes. I must. Well, he came home. He was my son. Nobody knew it. But can a father expose his own son? No. So I sheltered him and hid him. There was

always a chance—of better things. You're not a father, boy. You can't understand. . . ."

"I'm trying to," conceded Vail, but Roberts did not seem to hear it.

"When the ledge of ore was found, he started to get you. Started wrong. We could have filed a minin' claim on the actual ore deposit. A mineral right is paramount to your claim on this unproved land. He could have staked out a claim. But that was too slow. Besides, he made forcible entry on your property."

"Forcible entry?" echoed Vail, puzzled by this legal intricacy.

"Yeh. Most of that ore ledge happened to be inside your northern fence, in the hills nearest your pastures. You must have passed right around the ledge when you strung your barbed wire. Funny you didn't see it. Still, maybe you wasn't thinkin' of minerals then."

Vail frowned.

"But did the fence make such a big difference?"

"Yeh. Fatal. He'd gone off at half cock and raided your place. He'd cut the fence. He feared that sooner or later you might prove it on him. I looked up the law but it was too late. He was scared. He saw what he'd done. Rattled. He should have studied the law first, but that's not the way of crime—of some people. He figured he'd have to get you quick. It was the shorter way. I struggled, but it only made him more obstinate. He threatened me. I knew he'd carry out his threats. Never until this minute have I felt that I had an even break. No protection. I—I had to yield. He's reckless. Utterly reckless."

Vail felt a chilly sensation at the back of his neck as he scanned the top of the stairs for the lurking demon who was probably waiting there. He knew that his own presence had stiffened Roberts' nerve, but he didn't know how long it would last. The situation was too tense. Still, he managed to speak coolly although his mind was in a whirl.

"And this fellow resorted to violence when he could have gained his ends by legal means?" insisted the incredulous Vail. "It's hard to believe."

The old man sighed.

"You don't know how some brains are made, that's all. He chose his path on

impulse, before he thought of the law, and then it was too late. He had made forcible entry. He knew you might learn it some day. It scared him. It meant a court battle. Courts! Do you think he'd go into court?"

Vail frowned helplessly.

"Wasn't there any other way——"

"I tried to!" cried the old man, with sudden vehemence, as if he were trying piteously to justify himself to the creature upstairs. "Didn't I almost get on my knees, askin' you to sell? That was my way out. The only way. But you wouldn't see it. You wouldn't. God, how I wanted you to sell. Remember? But he knew you wouldn't. So he wanted to get you quick. In a hurry. Besides, since he hadn't done things legal, he had to act quick for fear you'd prow around and discover the green ledge for yourself."

Vail found himself perspiring.

"But why didn't you file?" he wondered. "Why didn't you take a chance on doing it legally, anyhow?"

"I wanted to. We're still arguin' about that. But he thinks it would tip our hand. It'd show who has an interest in that mine. He's afraid of it. He wants nobody to file till you people are well out of the way."

VAIL whistled. It was an astounding confession, with so many warped and twisted angles that he didn't know what to do about it. Dazed, he looked toward the top of the stairs. A soft hissing sound came from up there, but old Roberts' fist was clenched on the table. Some remnant of the bravery of his frontier youth had remained.

"No!" he shouted, desperately. "No! We can't go on! Can't! Damn it, I don't care what you threaten! Hear me? You've stripped me of my money; my hopes; almost my life; now you'll get my reputation. No! Drop it! Vail won't be harsh. I know Vail. For God's sake, drop it! Forget it!"

There were beads of perspiration on the old man's face, yet there came no reply from above.

Roberts took a sobbing breath, resuming his talk to Vail deliberately.

"The other man is Bill Harney. A teamster. He came out of a Texas jail last year. They hired a few ruffians at first—a night raid on your cattle—but the

rest of the things were done by the two of them. They prowled around your place, day and night. Bill Harney——"

"A big dirty fellow in corduroys?" interrupted Vail.

"Yes. Never takes a bath. He was the friend of—my son, *my son!*"

Feet clattered at the top of the stairs as the old man cried out. A slim, quick moving figure in blue overalls came five steps downward, halting behind the banister, carrying something which glinted.

"No!" The old man tried awkwardly to arise. "Edward! Edward——"

The voice from above jeered at him.

"Yeh? Well, you said it. The game's up. All right——"

"Edward!" screamed the old man.

The young fellow hesitated, looking at his father. His eyes were malignant pin-points set in a face whose pallor made its features delicately beautiful. There was something masklike about the visage, yet it was sinister as Satan.

"I told you to keep your mouth shut," he sneered, from a corner of his mouth. "I started this. I know how to finish it!"

The flashing thing in his hand came forward. Trickily he had been speaking to his sire, but without warning the pistol spewed forth thunderous blasts of fire toward Vail, causing him to reel like a leaf in a storm, tugging out his own pistol amid blinding flashes whose quick concussions seemed to lift the floor boards. The fast flashes came like outbursts from an impetuous, drug guided mind, without aim or method.

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

Bursts of flame dazed him; smoke stung his nostrils; concussions nearly burst his eardrums; yet he brought his six-shooter upward stubbornly, pulling trigger while wondering that he still lived.

His pistol kicked in his hand. The streak of flame blew the other smoke aside. And again. And again.

He saw the weird young man reel, plunging forward down the steps; and then a larger and heavier figure came furiously into sight behind him, trying to kneel while pointing a pistol through the banisters.

Frantically Vail fired again. He missed, though splinters leaped upward from the banisters, causing the big fellow to shrink backward, howling as he covered his eyes

with his left elbow. Then he staggered forward, leering with red eyes over his crooked elbow.

Three quick shots leaped upward from the doorway. It was an unexpected flank attack, stabbing through the smoke of the other shots.

Groaning, the giant went to his knees, balancing himself on all fours as he plunged grotesquely down the stairway.

Through the acrid gun smoke, Vail saw Lin McChesney in the doorway, easing down his pistol. Like wraiths in a fog, they stared at each other as the smoke cleared off, bringing each figure clearly into view.

"God!" whimpered McChesney, looking at the writhing giant and the crumpled heap above him. "What a life!"

Vail found his lips dry. He tried to move and to speak, but it was an effort. Then he noticed the old man, sitting with bowed head in his arms. Vail stepped awkwardly toward him as he heard McChesney's voice as if from a far distance.

"One down and one creased. The big bum's still alive. That means court trial and all that stuff. Now we'll have to prosecute!"

The old man looked up slowly, with horror in his eyes. Vail saw it and understood. He shook his head as he laid a hand on the weary old shoulder.

"No, old neighbor. We've had enough, you and I. There'll be no prosecutions. This is the end!"

X

THE strains of music, mingled with the laughter of pretty girls and their beaux, floated from the lighted windows and porches of Rancho Hidalgo two weeks later. Down below, where the moonlight threw the shadows of the iron gates upon a front door path which seemed to be paved with rhinestones, a line of automobiles were parked in solemn dignity. This decorum was disturbed by the arrival of a rickety flivver which drew alongside them and then came to a nerve shattering halt. The driver got out by lifting his legs over the side of the car.

A girl in white, waiting in a dark alcove behind the gate, came forth like a ghost in the moonlight. The man hastened to meet her. He was carrying a pair of

shiny patent leather shoes in his left hand.
"Is everything all right?" she asked, somewhat tremulously.

"Yes. The investigation's all over. The district attorney said there was something queer about the shooting affair but he took Roberts' statement that it was probably a quarrel between two drunken hired hands. Poor old fellow, he called them strangers! Unidentified men working on his ranch! He never blinked an eyelash. The cause of the shooting will remain forever a mystery. Poor old boy, I guess he's glad it's all over. He's suffered some through the years!"

"How about Jack?"

"In good shape. Falling in love with his nurse, they say."

"But how about the second criminal? The big fellow?"

"Harney? Skipped. Left the country. There'll be no more trouble from him. But tell me. Has your mother read about the thing in the local newspaper?"

"No. She doesn't subscribe. She hasn't the slightest inkling of the affair."

Vail chuckled.

"Well, another soul can rest easy, then."

"But—Jim! I hate to leave her like this tonight!"

He threw an arm around Aileen's shoulder.

"Never mind about that, honey. We'll be next door neighbors forever as soon as we get back from our honeymoon, won't we? She'll be coming over to our shanty soon enough. You watch!"

"But after all, Jim, wouldn't it be best to tell her tonight, and get her blessing?"

"Yes. If we could get the blessing!"

"But you're not such a socially impossible creature, Jim. A graduate of Yale, a civil engineer, a wealthy ranch-owner selling a copper mine to the Guldenheim Syndicate. . . ."

Vail chuckled again. His voice was bantering:

"A downtrodden ranch superintendent in disgrace for turning things upside down without authority," he reminded her. "Shucks! We'd be stopped in our tracks. I'd get a lecture which would tear my hair off. No. If it wasn't that there's a party going on, I wouldn't even dare show my head upstairs. Are the cars ready for the trip?"

"All of them."

"Are your things packed?" he asked.
"Yes."

He drew her close. They stood together in the moonlight for a long time while the orchestra's music from up above came loudly through the rose scented air. Then, turning away abruptly, he strode inside, changed his clothes in a room just off the lower hallway, and soon walked upstairs, a fine looking blond gentleman in a tuxedo outfit.

Dancers nodded to him. A group of girls displaying silken hosiery at the edge of the porch stopped chattering as they craned their heads toward him, but he gave them scant attention. He was about to make his last report to his employer.

SHE was seated in her favorite chair alongside the big desk in the library. She was clad in a swagger evening gown of pale green, tastefully draped to her figure by costumers who knew their business. She held a lorgnette to her eyes, gazing down into a magazine with a bright red cover. She did not actually see Vail but sensed the presence of a gentleman in the room. With a little gesture of petulance she threw the magazine down.

"What bosh! All about night riders, six-shooters, gun fights and such rot. Western literature, they call it. Incredible rubbish!"

Vail coughed.

"Yes," he agreed dazedly. "It's awful."

"Frightful! Why, I've been out West for two years, and except for a little incident concerning petty pilfering, I've never seen anything even remotely resembling such stuff."

He gasped at such complacency. With all the excitement raging around her, not the slightest inkling of it had ever reached her ears. Of course, he had tried to keep the news away from her, but he was startled as he realized how atrophied were her own powers of observation concerning things under her very nose. Yet here she was, vigorous and self-reliant, perfectly ready to discipline anyone and everyone who happened to incur her displeasure. Including Vail.

"Great Scott!" he gasped.

She looked up and focused her eyes on the visitor. Her manner became distinctly less cordial as she recognized him.

"Oh. I thought it was one of the guests."

Then, grudgingly: "You are looking very creditable tonight, Mister Vail."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jerdane. I might say the same to you."

"Oh. Yes. Thank you. You have something to report, I presume?"

"Well, one or two of the men would like your permission to wear different clothes."

"My employees? Nonsense!"

"They want overalls. Comfortable working clothes."

"Humph! I should say not! They know the rules; let them conform. And hereafter, Mister Vail, I am not going to make any concessions."

"But, Mrs. Jerdane——"

"Tut! I do not intend to have my men going about like tramps, thank you. And—er—now that we are talking of business matters, might I not suggest, Mister Vail, that it would also be best if you acceded to my wishes more gracefully hereafter? If I may say it, I have noticed rather an undercurrent of insubordination in your behavior lately."

Vail bowed, very respectfully.

"I hope that I will never trouble you in that manner again, Mrs. Jerdane," he promised, with eyes twinkling.

"Thank you! Thank you so much. Then I am sure we will get along very much better."

"Sooner or late, I'm sure we will," said Vail, with a trace of wistfulness in his voice.

"What? Oh. Thank you. That is very kind of you." She looked toward a young man in black and a girl in salmon pink who came hesitantly into the room. "What? You are all going for a ride? Oh, surely. A lovely night. Quite romantic. Just the night for young people." She smiled archly. "Return whenever you please. I know you young people need no chaperon nowadays. Don't bother about me. I'll probably be in bed."

VAIL had escaped through the crowd of young people going down toward the outer gate. He found Aileen, in a long cloak, alongside her powerful roadster. He pressed her hand.

"All set?" he asked.

"Everything's ready," she reported.

He climbed to the wheel, switching on the lights and power, while she took the seat

alongside him. He spoke to her, sotto voce.

"The church in town is decorated, and we're bringing the jazz orchestra to play the wedding march. Can they do it without turning it into a fox trot?"

She looked up to the stars.

"What difference does it make," she murmured, "as long as you're the bridegroom?"

He chuckled happily, just as a fuzzy white creature strode belligerently across the headlights, holding up a hand toward Vail.

"Wait a minute," came Lin McChesney's voice. "I ain't tryin' to ruin the party, but did you do that little job for me? Did you give her a song-and-dance?"

"I tried to," confessed Vail.

"Yeh? What'd she say?"

"She said no."

"No!" groaned McChesney, lifting a fuzzy leg. "Aw, hell. Look at 'em! Two sizes too big, and bowlegged at that. Hotter'n blazes in the summer time. Say. Listen. This is the end. I quit. I'm through. I've had enough. Why, there's even a rule in the bunkhouse now, sayin': 'Employees will be responsible for the clean condition of their apparel.' It was tacked up today. Dammit, do you know where I can get another job?"

Vail pondered.

"Well," he yielded, "I ought to be able to use a man on my own ranch for a while, till we can fix up a peace treaty with Aileen's mother."

"Whoopee!" McChesney yanked open the roadster's rumble seat, diving into it, angora pants and all. "Lead on, big boy, for better or worse! You've captured my heart!"

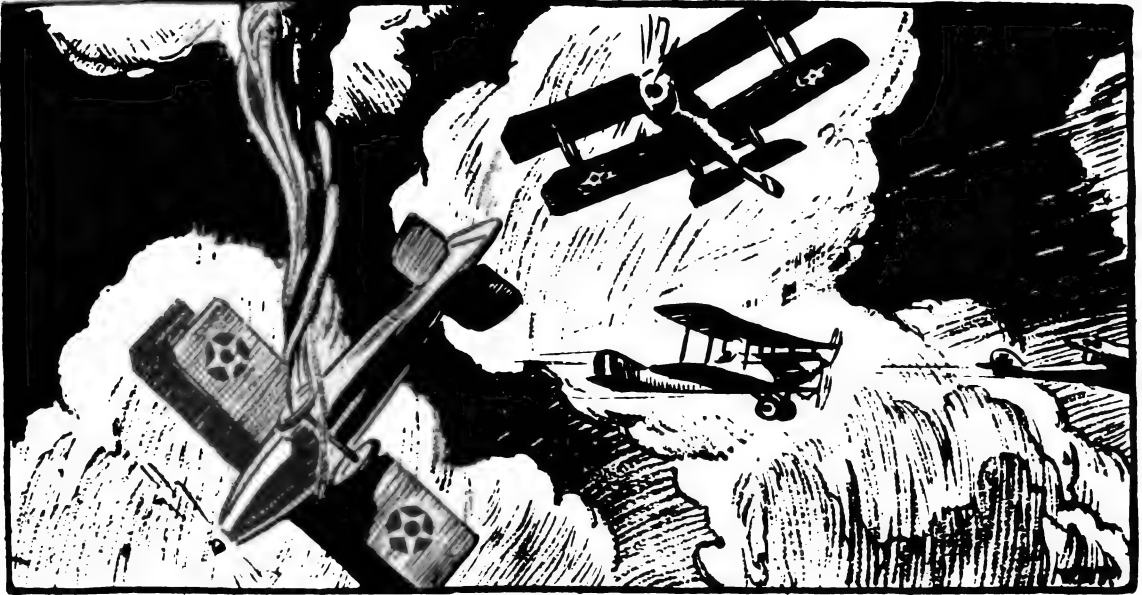
Vail hesitated as the uninvited wedding guest made himself comfortable; and then, with the laughing Aileen snuggling close to him, he opened the throttle and sped along after the long line of cars whose red tail-lights were winking across the near-by plain.

"Phooie! This is like the end of a bad dream!" remarked Lin McChesney, from the back seat.

Vail made the big car leap ahead faster.

"And it's the beginning of a good one," he added, gently. "Isn't it?"

Aileen pressed his hand. Far behind them, the lights of Rancho Hidalgo faded away in the dust.



The GRANDSTANDER

A Yarn of the Warfront Air Fields

By H. M. SUTHERLAND

THE sudden appearance of a score of pilots in front of the officers' quarters, and the hasty eruption of twice that number of mechanics from the shops over on the opposite side of the field, brought Shorty McCue and Chris Crossley out of the hanger where they were supervising the repairs on Shorty's riddled bus, and sent them scurrying down the tarmac where a crippled plane was flattening out awkwardly for a landing.

From the manner in which that scout single-seater was behaving, it was evident that either the pilot was wounded badly, or the ship had been shot to pieces—perhaps both. Straight into the teeth of a brisk wind he dived and hit the ground with such terrific force that when the wheels touched the surface of the field they rebounded high in the air and the bus turned a complete flip, landing flat on her back with a splintering crash.

Shorty and Chris with a quick sprint reached the wreck a few seconds after the crash, and from the cockpit they managed to extract the limp form of the pilot.

"Well, I'm damned!" ejaculated Crossley

in surprise. "It's the Grandstander."

"Has he clicked?" queried Shorty in a low tone, leaning forward to see if he could detect any signs of life. As best he could determine, the stricken flier had received no wounds except a gash on the side of his head, which appeared to have been suffered from bumping against the instrument board in the crash.

"Can't tell." Chris was gently lifting him from the tangle of controls and seat strap. "He's got a nasty crack on the head, but maybe he's just stunned. He's still breathing."

By that time the crowd was milling about the plane, each man trying to push close enough to see what had happened. Shorty waved them back, and then he and Chris lowered the still unconscious man into the arms of two mechanics who laid their burden in the shade of one of the wings.

"It's Captain Apperson," announced someone.

"Fritz got the Grandstander!"

"Brought his machine back an' him dead!" gasped an admiring mechanic.

These and other awed ejaculations sent a quiver of unwonted excitement through the Ninety-Eighth Squadron's drome, and brought the entire personnel upon the field. The great Dion Apperson had been brought down! The Grandstander, who had downed eighteen enemy planes with hardly a scratch to his own machine—and that within a period of a little more than a month at the front—had been shot down. And, though unconscious, he had instinctively piloted his bus back to the drome!

For the moment the Ninety-Eighth Squadron, more familiarly known as "the Red-Tailed Hawks", forgot its intense dislike for him. Forgot the arrogant condescension with which he had treated them. Forgot the aloof, sarcastic attitude which had characterized him. Forgot the time that he had palpably permitted Fritz to crash poor Cairns in order to stage one of his own theatrical stunts and add lustre to his name. And they united in paying tribute to a fallen flier whose dash, skill and cold nerve had made his name a by-word along the front. A quick, generous impulse to let bygones be bygones swept through them, and it was with unsimulated admiration that they crowded in close and solicitously watched Shorty's efforts to revive him.

Someone pressed a flask into Shorty's hand, and he forced a few drops between Apperson's lips while Chris was swiftly searching for possible wounds. At last he straightened and shook his head in negation.

"Seems to be just knocked out," he announced to the crowd. "He ought to snap out of it in a few minutes."

Almost immediately Apperson began to show signs of returning consciousness and a few seconds later was able to sit up and stare about him a bit dazedly.

"What happened?" demanded several voices at once, their eagerness for the details of the scrap overcoming their reticence in questioning him.

Apperson shrugged indifferently and then struggled to his feet, where he stood for an instant swaying weakly. He shot a frowning stare slowly over the crowd, and then appeared his old, arrogant, audacious smile which in itself was a direct challenge.

"All right!" he said acidly. "I cracked hard. And I hope you birds enjoyed it. Every damn one of you would like to see

my neck broken, but I'm not going to gratify your desires to that extent as long as I can avoid it. But since you're so damn inquisitive about what happened to me, I'll tell you. The Phantom shot away my rudder."

With that he turned on his heel and strode away in the direction of the C.O.'s office to make his report.

For an instant the crowd about the machine remained silent and motionless, and then Shorty and Chris, accompanied by a dozen others, went back to examine the tail. It was, as Apperson had said, literally riddled by machine gun fire, and the miracle of how he had managed to pilot his bus back home and land at all was deeply impressed upon them.

"You've got to hand it to him," declared Shorty warmly. "Anybody else would've cracked at the time he was hit. No wonder he flopped when he grounded."

"So he hooked up with the Phantom!" exclaimed Chris, looking over the plane for other signs of combat, but apparently the Phantom had not been able to get his guns on any other part of the machine.

"What I want to know," said one of the mechanics wonderingly, "is how the hell he got away from the Phantom—crippled like he was?"

"Strange, isn't it?" murmured Shorty with a grin. "Chances are Apperson was just playing to the grandstand again. Wanted an alibi for gettin' his tail shot off and figured he'd get more credit if he told that it was the Phantom."

"Maybe," grunted Chris. "But I'm doubting the ability of any other Hun on this front to ride him like that."

FOR weeks the Red-Tailed Hawks had talked of little save the Phantom—a mysterious enemy flier—who in two successive days had dropped Cairns and Bernard, two of the best scouts and fighters of the Ninety-Eighth, and had played havoc with reconnaissance flights from other near-by fields. He was an enigma who was troubling the entire front and crippling the work of the air service more than the High Command dared admit. And, although five of the Ninety-Eighth Squadron's best scouts had been detailed to get him, he was still as elusive and menacing as he had been on the first day he appeared in that sector.

Everyone in the squadron was practically assured that he was Von Kohl, second only among the Hun aces to the Bloody Baron himself. His flying was superb, his accuracy with his machine guns positively uncanny, and his daring unexcelled in air annals. But what made of him such a deadly menace was the fact that he was flying a captured plane—a humpbacked Camel with its tail painted crimson—so that it was impossible to tell whether he was a friend or a foe when he approached. His bus must have been marked in some manner known only to the Fritz Jagstaffels on that front, else one of the Fokkers would have dropped him by mistake. But those markings, if they were there, were unknown to the Allied birdmen, and he continued his serene and devastating way with a coolness and audacity which was having a serious effect upon the esprit de corps of the Ninety-Eighth.

Only a few weeks previous, a French cadet from a near-by escadrille had been forced down out of control, but had made a safe landing behind the German lines, and of course Von Kohl had repaired that ship and adopted it for his own use. As a result he had been able to throw a feeling of doubt and uncertainty into the Red-Tails and other flying units so that they were afraid to open an attack upon any solo Camel for fear he might be a member of their own squadron. And this hesitancy was sufficient for Von Kohl to assume the aggressive, with inevitably fatal results.

Dion Apperson, premier ace of the Ninety-Eighth, had been among the five men detailed to get the Phantom, and this, his second patrol, had almost been his last. And because of his discomfiture there would be secret rejoicing among the Red-Tailed Hawks, particularly when it was known that his injuries were not serious.

Inherently theatrical and spectacular, he had from the beginning fought his battles in single combat, and on more than one occasion it had been plainly apparent that he had deliberately avoided co-operating in a free-for-all dogfight in order to climb into the sun and dive into a magnificent victory for himself at the expense of some unwary Fritz. Had it not been for the fact that he had witnessed some daring stunts on Apperson's part, Shorty would have been inclined to believe that the Grandstander had a yellow streak hidden

away in his makeup; but his courage could not be questioned. Selfish, perhaps, and spoiled, certainly; but not cowardly.

Not only did he hold himself aloof while in the air, but on the ground as well. He simply would not mix with the other members of the squadron. He was freezingly polite on all occasions when his sarcasm and ironic tongue were not in full play, and it was for these and other characteristics that he had received the appellation "The Grandstander." Grading a captain, he enjoyed certain privileges not accorded everyone, which included the right to do pretty much as he pleased both on and off duty.

Apperson was reading on his bunk when Shorty and Chris came in from mess that night, and about the room in various attitudes of repose lounged some ten or twelve members of the squadron. Shorty walked over to Apperson's bunk and waited an instant for the latter to look up. Apperson ignored him.

"I understand the Phantom jumped you today, Apperson," he said with an attempt at affability. "Did you locate any markings on his bus by which we might identify him?"

"Find out for yourself," snapped the Grandstander without looking up from his magazine.

"Needn't be so damned touchy," replied Shorty with asperity. "I was merely asking a civil question."

Apperson dropped his book and sat upon the edge of his bunk, staring insolently at Shorty.

"Now see here!" he called in a tone which everyone could overhear. "I'm asking absolutely nothing of you birds and you can expect absolutely nothing from me. The Grandstander, am I?" He laughed bitterly. "Then I'm playing to my own audience and you are not included. And I might add that whatever you think of me—it's *mutual*."

The insult was deliberate, and for an instant Shorty saw through a red haze. He was almost overpowered by the impulse to jerk Apperson to his feet and punch some of the conceit out of him. The egotistical pup! Then with an effort he wheeled and strode across the room.

The pregnant silence of the moment was interrupted by the arrival of the C. O.'s orderly with a message ordering the

quintet on special detail to report to Major Hartley immediately. Chris, Shorty, Apperson. Voight and Mitchell all came to their feet, and on the way over to the office Chris took Shorty to task for broaching Apperson.

"Let the damned pup alone!" he growled. "He was born an unmitigated ass and he's suffering with a relapse. He's got a special grouch against you because he knows you gave him the name 'Grandstander,' and I wouldn't put it above him to do you a dirty turn if he thought he could get away with it. Better watch him! He's poisoned with arrogance and self-adulation."

AT THE major's office they waited for several minutes before Apperson arrived. The C. O. was tensed and nervous, striding backward and forward across the floor impatiently while they waited, but when the Grandstander did appear, he said nothing to him about the delay. With a keen glance at the quintet he caught up an official looking document.

"G. H. Q. is raising merry hell," he announced in a worried tone. "Today this damned Phantom dropped two D. H. Nines and a French Spad, and winged Captain Apperson as all of you know. In addition to this, one of the French aces brought down a member of his own escadrille, believing that he was fighting with the Phantom until his victim was identified. The result of this has been practically to paralyze aerial action on this front entirely. Doubt, hesitancy and uncertainty, each fatal to effective flying, are taking a heavy toll of Allied airmen, as this memorandum from G. H. Q. proves, and we've got to put a stop to it now."

He paused for an instant, glaring at the quintet.

"I have been ordered to eliminate this menace at all costs," he continued in staccato. "And from this time on, you five men, and three other pilots from this squadron whom I shall select in the morning, will devote your entire time and attention to the Phantom. Some of you will be in the air every hour of the day. Get him! I don't give a damn how you manage it, but get him and get him quick. As an incentive to you men, I might add that the man who crashes him will succeed Cairns as flight commander of the Ninety-Eighth Squadron. That is all tonight, men."

With a wave of his hand he dismissed them and they trooped outside and back to the billet in thoughtful silence.

The Grandstander was first to go up the next morning and as he took off and disappeared into the rising mists in the north, Shorty and Chris prepared for their dual patrol, working together as they had done from their first flight, with Chris hiding aloft in the sun or any clouds which were convenient and diving to Shorty's assistance at the opportune moment. This plan of action had proved highly effective in the past, evidenced by Shorty's six official victories and five for Chris, and had resulted in each man feeling the necessity of the other's presence, and in cementing their friendship until they had become inseparable.

They watched Apperson until the fogs had swallowed him, and then they turned to where the mechanics were rolling out the machines they were to fly.

"He's sort of anxious to be boss of the outfit," remarked Chris with a crooked grin. "And it would be just our luck to have that happen. Hell! I'll resign and join the infantry before I'll let that bird ride me."

Shorty shrugged, but offered no comment. For ten minutes he gave his attention to his engine, and, at last satisfied that it was in excellent condition, he motioned for the aids to remove the chocks. Then giving it the gun, he shot out across the tarmac with a roar. And, as he jerked her off the floor, he saw Chris, out of the corner of his eye, taxi out behind him. Soaring over the trees at the end of the field, he banked sharply and throttled down until Chris drew alongside. Then they headed for the northern horizon, where Apperson had vanished, and began to climb slowly for the ceiling.

When they neared the rumbling, growling front lines they separated, Shorty turning sharply east to patrol the front while Chris spiraled rapidly toward the sun to stand guard over his pal. Very little aerial activity was in evidence at that hour. At one place an Allied sausage balloon floated lazily a mile or so behind the lines, and a little later a D. H. observer slipped along the lines taking pictures, escorted by three Spads who droned along about a thousand feet above it. Suddenly four Fokkers appeared from across the lines and the two-

seater, apparently having the photographs it wanted, headed for home and disappeared. The Spads lingered a bit, but the Hun formation banked and vanished in a westerly direction.

Shorty doubled on his course and also turned west, keeping a wary eye out for the lurking Phantom, but if the latter were out, he remained hidden. Rather intense strafing was going on along the entire battle front below, and it looked like Jerry was staging an offensive on a larger scale than he had attempted for several weeks. Almost before he realized it, Shorty had reached the western end of his patrol, and he was on the point of banking about when he saw a single plane perhaps half a mile in front of him and at a slightly lower level. On the alert, he waited, idling along to permit the approaching machine to get within recognition distance.

When it was still almost a quarter of a mile distant he saw that it was a humpback Camel, similar to his own, and on the instant he began climbing in an effort to gain an advantageous position in case it was the Phantom. He shot a glance toward the sun to see if he could locate Chris, but if he was on watch he was well hidden in the ball of the sun or else was so high as to be invisible.

Straight for him sped that lone Camel, darting ahead with wide-open throttle which ate up the intervening distance in split seconds. Then with startling abruptness that Camel zoomed almost vertically and passed Shorty in the race for altitude almost before the latter had realized his intent. An expert was at the controls of that ship, and instinctively Shorty reasoned that it must be the Phantom.

A SWIFT examination of his gun showed Shorty that it was in working order and he prepared for the Phantom's initial rush. It came with the quickness of light, flipping over into a steep dive and plunging down upon Shorty at a terrific speed. With a sharp turn and half roll, Shorty dodged the lines of white tracer bullets and nosed over, catching the Phantom for a fleeting instant in the crossed wires of his sights. But in that fleeting instant, even as he pressed the thumbpiece, he caught a glimpse of the pilot's face at a distance of not more than twenty feet, and he grew rigid and taut in

every muscle. That face and that arrogant grin could belong to no one except Dion Apperson.

Frozen by that realization Shorty stalled for an instant, and as he whipped about he saw Apperson coming for him again, making one of the shortest Immelman turns Shorty ever saw executed. It was only by a quick sideslip and dive that Shorty evaded the burst of fire that Apperson loosed.

"The damned murderer!" grated Shorty. "He knows me and he's tryin' to crack me, knowin' they can't touch him for it. He can claim that he thought I was the Phantom. Damn his rotten soul!"

As Shorty zoomed again, trying vainly to signal Apperson with his hand, the Grandstander was on his tail and he saw furrows and rips appear suddenly on his right wing and along the fuselage dangerously close as he glanced back. Giving her the gun, he leaped upward like a cork and looped over, coming in behind Apperson, but the latter, anticipating that move, had banked over and was watching his chance to plunge in again. Swinging about in an ever decreasing circle, each man trying to place a damaging burst where it would do the most good, they narrowly averted a crash in mid-air.

A boiling rage gripped Shorty and grimly he clung on to Apperson's tail, but never quite able to angle his bus to the point where he could fire effectively. It was either get Apperson or be sent down in flames, and with this thought, Shorty dived, intending to come up under the Grandstander and riddle him from beneath. But in some inexplicable manner Apperson was on him again, and the next instant Shorty's instrument board was splintered before his eyes. Then, with a sickening *ping*, a wing strut parted and Shorty gasped in dismay.

With a groan of impotency he knew that his plane with a strut broken could not stand the strain of another steep dive, and that at any instant that wing was liable to crumple like cardboard, so he deliberately turned tail upon Apperson and, giving his engine all it had, he headed south in the direction of the drome, hoping that Apperson would understand that move and desist.

With a sinking feeling of utter helplessness he saw Apperson straighten about and dart in pursuit, training his gun upon the crippled Camel's gas tank. It would

be only a matter of seconds until. . .

Rat, tat, tat! The burst of machine gun fire came distinctly to Shorty's ears and he ducked low in the cockpit. Venturing a glance backward Shorty gave a yell of joy and whipped the bus about regardless of that broken strut. Chris had joined in the game, diving in on Apperson from above and the two were circling furiously in as pretty a scrap as Shorty wanted to see.

Then Apperson must have realized that he would have no excuse for fighting two Camels at the same time and place for he suddenly dived to within a few hundred feet of the ground and vanished in a southerly direction. Chris drew in alongside Shorty and then the two of them made their way back home.

APPERSON had already arrived when they came down and was inspecting his ship. Shorty climbed stiffly from the cockpit and strode to the Grandstander's plane. As the latter straightened from his task, Shorty, with a full arm swing, slapped his face with such force that he staggered backward two or three paces.

For an instant Apperson stood as if stunned and then a flush of swiftly rising rage flooded his cheeks. He tossed aside his flying tunic and stepped in close to his lighter and smaller antagonist as a ring of spectators formed about them silently. As they closed, Shorty received a solid punch on his jaw that rocked him back on his heels, and he retaliated with a series of uppercuts and jabs, one of which he felt go home to Apperson's chin and a fierce surge of joy shot through him at the contact.

Apperson clinched to recover from the blow, and at that instant Major Hartley burst through the throng and hurtled himself headlong upon them. The C. O. was a man of unusual strength and agility, and he tore them apart as if they had been kids. Then, livid with anger, he shook his fist at both of them.

"Will you kindly tell me what's the meaning of this?" he demanded acidly. "Can't you men get enough fighting out of the enemy to satisfy you? Why, dammit, I've a mind to court-martial both of you for insubordination and conduct unbecoming an officer! Go to your quarters immediately and wait there until you hear

from me. But, wait a minute! What was the cause of this? You?" He leveled a shaking finger at Shorty.

"Nothing much." Shorty's irony failed to register. "He just jumped me up at the front a while ago and tried his damndest to crack me. Riddled my bus and shot my instrument board away."

"Is that true?" The major was watching Apperson closely.

The Grandstander shrugged in careless indifference.

"You, of course, thought he was the Phantom," the major continued through slitted lips.

"But naturally," replied Apperson with a curling smile. "I would've explained if he had given me a chance."

"He lies," cut in Shorty harshly. "He recognized me as soon as I recognized him. He saw a chance to crash me and get away with it, that's all."

"That's enough, McCue," admonished the major sharply. "Hereafter, before any of you attack a Camel, signal with two short bursts from your machine gun. Understand? Now, you two men go to your quarters and stay there until it's your turn to go on patrol. Another word of this from either of you and I'll order a court-martial. This is a hell of a way to get the Phantom, isn't it?"

Chris accompanied Shorty to his billet, and in their quarters they sat down to talk the matter over. Shorty was still seething with anger, and when Apperson passed them on his way to his own bunk, Chris as a precautionary measure, grasped Shorty's arm and held it tightly.

"The dirty coward!" grated Shorty, conquering the desire to go over there and settle the score once and for all.

"Let's give him the benefit of the doubt, Shorty," urged Chris. "You'll have to admit that he quit when I showed up this morning, and he hates me almost as much he does you. We're all a bit jumpy. He probably was so anxious to get the Phantom that he didn't recognize you."

"Hell! I had no helmet on. The lousy——"

"But you were wearing goggles," interrupted Chris. "Come on, Shorty! You might be wrong. Let's give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Doubt!" Shorty laughed mirthlessly. "The only doubt in my mind is whether or

not he himself is the Phantom. Had you thought of that before?"

"Don't be a fool," exploded Chris harshly. "If he was in sympathy with the enemy he would never have dropped eighteen of their planes, would he?"

"Wait a minute! Get me straight on this." Shorty's even tones bespoke his suppressed anger. "I'm not saying he's fighting with and for Fritz. I'm merely debating whether or not the man is sane. You'll have to admit that his actions are abnormal at times, the way he stays with himself and avoids us. Think, man! Every time the Phantom has crashed a man it was while the Grandstander was on patrol. And he flies a red-tailed Camel! Put all those things together and see what you dope out."

For a full minute Chris was silent, frowning in deep thought, and then he shook his head in emphatic negation.

"You're all wrong, Shorty. The Phantom is Von Kohl; I'm certain of that. Come on, forget about Apperson! We're going on patrol again at three o'clock and you don't want to tangle up with that Hun with a set of jumpy nerves. Cool off!"

And he threw himself upon his bunk with the palpable intention of getting some sleep before his next trick on duty.

AT THREE O'CLOCK, when they got out on the field, they found that Apperson had been gone for perhaps a quarter of an hour, and without comment Chris and Shorty climbed into the machines made ready for them. Shorty's plane was manifestly new and the music of its motor was sweet and true. He felt the surge of unlimited power when he gave it the gun, and through him rushed a feeling of exultation which caused him to forget the unpleasantness of the morning and the myriad gamut of dangers he faced. He knew that his ship, so perfectly attuned, would perform in such a manner that he could give an excellent account of himself no matter who his opponent might be.

Once more they were over the fighting zone and again they separated, Shorty taking the lower course and Chris climbing into the sun to stand guard. In this manner they had patrolled probably twenty miles of the front when a sudden and dramatic conflict dropped through the low bank of clouds only a few hundred

meters ahead. Three Fokkers were attacking a Camel, each of them swirling about their dodging, twisting quarry in an effort to send him blazing downward, but apparently afraid to fire for fear of hitting one of their own planes.

For an instant Shorty hesitated and then, glancing upward, he saw Chris hovering just beneath those clouds, undecided whether to dive to the rescue or not. Whether the pilot of that Camel was Apperson, Voight, or Smithson it was impossible to ascertain, and as Shorty nosed over to get closer in and give what assistance he could, he saw Chris plunge straight into the heart of that whirling mass, firing continuously as he dived. Throwing caution to the winds Shorty hurtled himself into the mêlée, and just when he was on the point of sending a burst of bullets into one of the black hulled Fokkers, he froze into immobility and choked back the cry of horror that welled in his throat.

Chris, plunging past that beleaguered Camel in pursuit of the scattering Fokkers, was naturally ignoring the red-tailed plane he was trying to aid, and it squared about with a quick turn and let Chris have a long burst from its machine gun at a range of not more than twenty yards. It was withering and deadly and Shorty knew that Chris could not go through it untouched. Then he gasped in fear and unbelief as his pal's bus sideslipped and plunged downward in a sickening tail spin.

The full realization of the meaning of that kaleidoscopic performance he had just witnessed flashed over Shorty with the quickness of light. That dogfight had been a ruse to draw in an unsuspecting victim. Those Fokkers had been chasing the Camel, but no shots were fired at it, for the simple reason that the decoy was the Phantom. And poor old loyal Chris! He had gone in to help and had been sent down out of control—crashing far down below.

Obsessed with the burning desire to avenge Chris and utterly unconscious of the fact that the odds were four to one, Shorty threw his machine headlong into the German formation, spraying everything that came within range with frenzied bursts of fire. The three Fokkers scattered, but the Phantom banked sharply and came at him, spitting his venomous tracers as he rushed. Several of these came uncomfortably close to Shorty, but ignoring them he

wove in an out, a plunging, writhing, whirling demon who fought as few men had ever battled above the clouds or below.

One of the Fokkers got in his path and an instant later it went down a flaming meteor, and Shorty with a staccato laugh, zoomed over the Phantom with a scant inch to spare under his wheels. As he banked again he saw the two remaining Fokkers closing in behind him and he was forced to slip down out of that trap only to come under the guns of the Phantom. Once more he dived, then came out of it and zoomed again, coming up under the Phantom with an unexpected move that caught the Hun helpless. Pressing the thumb-piece a single explosion followed and then the gun was silent. Again he pressed it—without results. It was jammed!

Completely at the Phantom's mercy he nosed the plane straight over and dived, working at his feed belts in a frenzied effort to loosen the jam. He beat the breach with his fists until he almost screamed with the pain of each blow, and still that feed would not work. Opening the breach, he sought to pull that belt out and readjust it, but it defied his every effort, and then the singing of the struts and the awful speed earthward forced him to desist and give his attention to the controls and throttle.

The gray fields below seemed to be rushing up to him with unbelievable rapidity, and he knew that if he flattened out suddenly, the wings might crumple under that terrific strain, but he had to take the chance and, as he started to ease back on the controls, he saw that the Phantom and the two Fokkers were coming down on his tail ready to give him the *coup de grace* the instant he showed that he wasn't going to crash and started out of his dive.

WITH this sickening realization facing him, he peered over the cockpit and at a glance saw that a comparatively level field lay directly below him and that another plane had landed there ahead of him. Chris had righted his plane and made a safe landing!

A fraction of a second would be too late to flatten out for that field, and yet Shorty dreaded to make that move, knowing full well that the first indication of it would bring a hail of bullets upon him. In desperation he crouched low in the cockpit and eased his machine's nose up.

Then came a roll of machine gun fire and, with a start of surprise he felt no impact of the bullets on his ship.

Venturing a glance behind him an unexpected sight greeted him, and he banked swiftly around and for the next two or three minutes he flew automatically, totally unconscious of his own plight as he watched a feat so spectacular that it took his breath away. Out of the fleecy clouds above him a wasplike Camel was diving like a shadow straight in upon the Phantom and the two Fokkers. His first burst, coming at the instant Shorty flattened, caught one of the Fokkers squarely amidships, and it went down in flames not fifty feet distant from Shorty's slowly circling machine. Then the newcomer plunged into a triangular fight with the Phantom and the one remaining Fokker.

The very verve and daring of that attack brought to Shorty the conviction that it was none other than the Grandstander. Those tactics were his as was the execution of the maneuver, and in another instant the conviction was verified when the unknown flier zoomed almost perpendicularly—a typical Apperson zoom.

"The Grandstander!" murmured Shorty, his admiration overshadowing his grudge.

With an insolent recklessness the Grandstander whipped his little plane in between the Fokker and the Phantom and then, flying parallel with them, he gradually closed in on the Phantom. When at a distance of forty or fifty feet he thrust out an arm and emptied an automatic at the Hun ace, but apparently without effect.

The Phantom rolled over and came up under Apperson, but the latter was ready for him and slipped into a blind spot from which he Immelmanned into a position where he had the Phantom at a disadvantage. On the instant that he was aligning the Hun for a burst, the other Fokker slipped in on his tail and let him have a salvo. Apperson's ship quivered, and Shorty held his breath, but the Grandstander wing-slipped out of it and spiraled upward swiftly.

With the strength of desperation Shorty went to work again at his jammed gun as the Phantom and Apperson circled in a close combat, with that Fokker hovering around trying to get in again. And with that Fokker to back the Phantom, it was only a matter of seconds until one of them

would get Apperson. No one man could fight the Phantom and stand off another plane at the same time. Giving up the jammed gun as a hopeless job, Shorty climbed straight for that Fokker. At least, if he was weaponless, he could keep that Hun busy and take him off the Grandstander's tail until he and the Phantom could settle their mixup.

During the next five minutes he was so busy keeping out of the way of that persistent Fokker's guns that he was unable to follow the more spectacular fight. Then suddenly that Fokker wheeled and high-tailed it for home with every ounce of speed the machine was capable of giving. Surprised, Shorty watched it for an instant and then turned his attention to the field below in time to see one of the two Camels crash, but which it was he could only conjecture. Still it must have been the Phantom, or the Fokker would not have fled so inconspicuously.

The surviving Camel was circling around that field below, looking for a landing. Shorty nosed over and, choosing a comparatively smooth stretch, he succeeded in getting down without mishap. As he climbed from the cockpit he saw Chris coming toward him and just beyond him Apperson was striding toward the mass of wreckage which had been the Phantom's machine.

"He got the Phantom," announced Chris, coming up. "He was Von Kohl, as most of us thought."

Shorty caught Chris's hand and wrung it.

"Thought they got you, Chris. Your bus out of commission?"

"Shot to hell! I'll ride your wing in."

With a nod Shorty walked over to the wreck, and as he drew near, Apperson coolly removed his flying coat.

"If you want to settle our little difference here. . . ."

Shorty grinned and thrust out his hand.

"I'm apologizing, Apperson," he said simply. "I'm willing to call it square—after what you've just done. He had me right. And I don't mind saying also that I'll be damned glad to fight under a man who can put up the scrap you just staged."

"That goes for me, too," added Chris.

"You made it possible, McCue," declared Apperson, with a grin that was without the arrogance and conceit that had formerly characterized it. "If you hadn't taken that Fokker off my tail, the result would have been different. But why didn't you drop that bird? You had him at your mercy at least twice."

"My gun was jammed—went dead on me in that first scrap."

An expression of wonder and disbelief crossed Apperson's face as he stared at Shorty.

"Do you mean," he asked slowly, "that you took that Fokker off my tail—without a gun to defend yourself? You did that—after what happened this morning—and for me?"

"Forget it!" cut in Shorty. "You had just taken three of 'em off me."

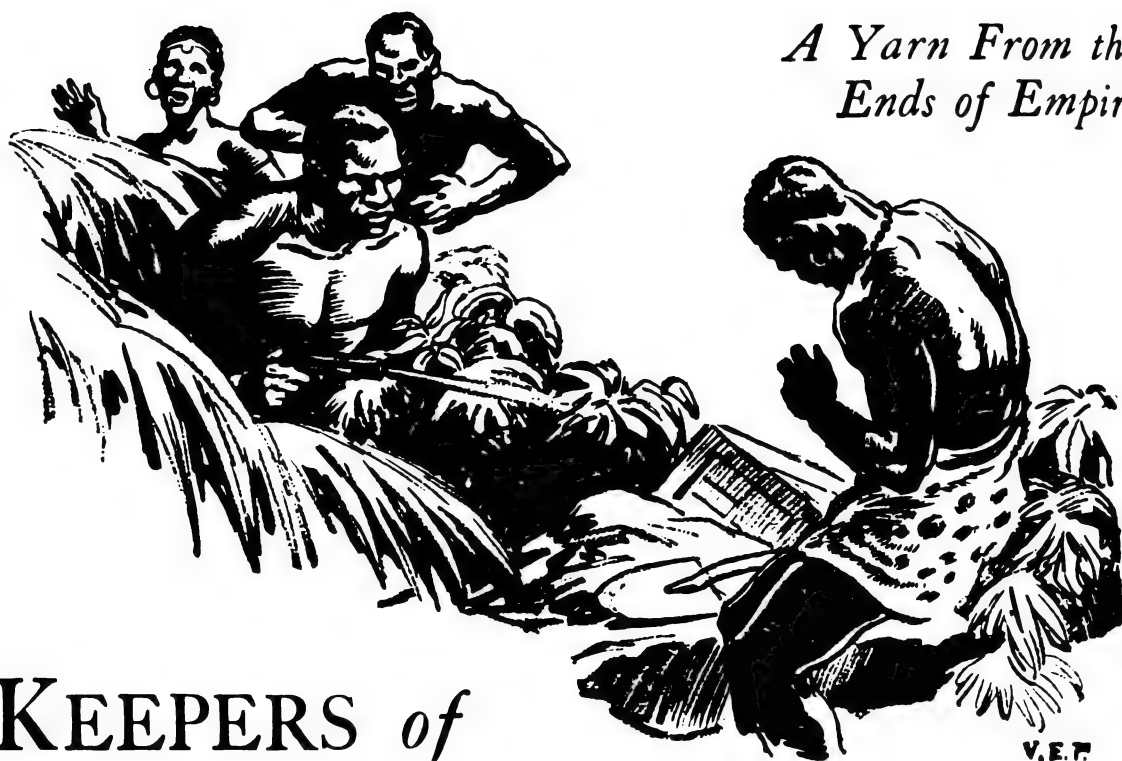
For a long minute Apperson was silent and then he straightened with a shrug.

"I don't mind admitting," he said at last in a tone that was new with him, "that I've been several kinds of a damn fool, but if you fellows are willing to wipe the slate clean and start over again, I think that—you'll find that I will profit by experience. But I do want you to know, McCue, that I didn't recognize you this morning when I tried to shoot down your Camel."

And they silently shook hands.



*A Yarn From the
Ends of Empire*



KEEPERS *of* *the* TREASURE *By* EDGAR WALLACE

YEARS and years ago, *cala cala* as the saying is, when the Portuguese were in the land, came many canoes along the great river. In those days there was a river that ran through the N'gombi country; it is now an overgrown depression in the forest. Whence came this expedition nobody knew. The men camped on the edge of the Ochori country and made a fortification with the help of forced labor. Then came other men in pursuit, and there was a great battle of swords and spears, and in the end the attackers succeeded. Every defender was put to the sword, but when the victorious captain came to look for the ten great boxes which the fugitives had brought with him they were not to be found. They had been buried by somebody; legend gave credit to a score of somebodies.

From time to time adventurers had sought the hiding place. One chief of the Ochori, who was supposed to know where the boxes were hidden, had been put to the torture. Commissioners had made the most careful inquiries; commanders of expeditions who were of a romantical turn

of mind had dug and probed—but all to no purpose.

There remained this substance to the legend, that in a village of the Ochori three men were called “The Keepers of the Treasure Place,” and the office was hereditary and very old.

What treasure they guarded, no man knew. They professed to have exact information, and whispered their secret to every new guardian that death appointed.

The Portuguese treasure was a common subject of gossip up and down the coast. Once Lieutenant Tibbetts had made an ineffectual search, guided by a dream. Captain Hamilton of the King's Hussars suggested a remedy for such dreams.

“Coarseness, dear old thing!” murmured Bones, shocked. “Vulgarity, dear old officer! Come, come, this will never do!”

“Did you really dream you saw the cave?” asked Sanders, interested.

“Yes, excellency and friend. A dashed big cave in the side of the mountain. Wonderful lights, all colors, inside. And I stepped brightly into the cave an' there was a dear old johnny in a white robe, an

angel or something ghastly, and he said——"

"'Welcome, Ali Baba?'" suggested Hamilton.

Bones made a tutting noise.

The next time he went into the Ochori he came to a village reputedly built on or near the site of the treasure trove, and interviewed the chief.

"Lord, it is true that I and two very old men are keepers of this wonder which no man has seen because of the devil who sit under the trees by day and night and change into a hundred leopards when man goes near them. But the place may not be told until I and the two old men die."

Bones spent a week in the forest, looking for a place where buried treasure might be, and all the time he was stalked by the slim widow who coveted the treasure. In course of time Bones went back to face the withering sarcasms of his superior officer. But the widow continued her search, for she had a rapacious lover who desired wealth—a tall, broad man who plastered his hair with clay and wore the skin of a leopard and stood around in statuesque attitudes, but did nothing much else to earn his living.

This woman, whose name was N'saki, had had three husbands and each of these died. There was nothing remarkable about their ends. They were very old, and the Dark One beckons such with great frequency. Such is the mind of man that when she offered herself to M'gama, the middle aged chief of the village, he rejected her.

"It seems that there is a devil in you, N'saki, so that men who have loved you go quickly to the ghosts. Three Keepers of the Treasure have taken you to their huts and three have died. Now I desire to live, and all the loveliness you offer me is as nothing if I die."

N'saki was a rich woman, her three husbands having been plentifully blessed. Also, she was beautiful to look upon and so clever that she read men's minds. She was eighteen, slim as a reed, and childless. And she greatly wished to be the wife of the chief of the village, who reputedly shared the secret of the buried treasure. Some said this was dead ivory and some that it was white man's wealth. Her handsome lover favored the latter theory.

"All you have done is for nothing,

woman," he said irritably. "Three dying men have you had in your hands and none told you the Magic Ground, and their places have been filled."

"O N'kema-M'libi!" she pleaded. "I did what was to be done. Some I choked a little, so that they were frightened; but because of their juju they feared worse to tell me. Now M'gama is a greater coward, and if he would have had me as his wife I would have made him speak. I will ask him again, and if he will not take me I will go to Bosambo and tell him of this treasure, for I think that M'gama knows of the little yellow cup."

Now this was true, that there had appeared in M'gama's hut a yellow cup of beautiful design, and wise men knew it was gold, but none was so wise that he could guess where M'gama had found it. N'saki guessed.

"I will find a way," she said.

EVENTUALLY she found it, with the aid of a man from Senegal and another from the Kroo coast, who were at that moment newly arrived on the coast from the City and State of New York.

One of these was from Dakar, and his name was Fendi. He was a black man, Nubian black as distinct from the brown men of the river. The French did not like Fendi, who spoke three languages well; and since the French are masters of Senegal their antipathy counted. They did not like his influence or the prosperity which enabled him to live in enviable luxury; but their first objection to him was his poisonous contact with civilization. For Fendi had been to France, had fought in the ring both in Paris and in New York, and had been expelled from the latter city at the instance of the immigration authorities.

Fendi had joined up with certain tough forces in Harlem, where he had lived for five years, and his American adventures had terminated with a gang fight in which razors, automatics and broken glass had figured conspicuously.

They took Fendi out of the hospital whither unloving hands had borne him and put him on a boat bound for the Coast.

"Come back and we'll bump you," said an official significantly.

"I shouldn't be the first gen'leman you've bumped," said Fendi defiantly.

He took away with him from the United States enough money to live—by Dakar standards—in comfort for the rest of his life.

With him was exported one Mr. Seluki, a native of Liberia and a Master of Arts of the University of Romeville, Oklahoma. That M.A. set him back two hundred bucks. Seluki stopped off at Dakar, and, with his friend, went up to St. Louis, which lies at the end of the railway. St. Louis was dull; Dakar was slow. They came back to the capital and settled down with certain undesirable elements in the lower town.

Fendi's pride in his home town brought no enthusiastic response from his companion.

"Yuh! That governor general's palace is fine, but gimme Little Old!"

In this familiar way did he refer to the Empire City of New York.

In the lodging house where they stayed, they met a Christian, American trained native who had worked with the missionaries until he was found out. He had stories to tell of a land flowing with milk and honey; a raw, rich country stiff with dead ivory.

"Why, fellers, there was a guy from Liberia, a nigger named Bosambo, who went in and cleaned up; and he's worth a million dollars if he's worth talking about. And have you heard about the buried treasure? A million dollars' worth, and any guy could snatch it."

Fendi listened and was fascinated; Seluki had heard of Bosambo and the treasure before.

A month later the two boarded an Elder-Dempster boat southward bound.

"What you gotta do," counseled the Christian man, "is to play native. You go in fresh an' start cracking English and this guy Sanders'll fire you out so that you'll never feel the grass rustle under your feet. And don't pull any missionary stuff neither. He won't stand for allelulia niggers. Get him right and he's dead easy."

To the residency on a certain afternoon came two humble natives. Seluki, who talked Bomongo fluently, was the spokesman.

"Lord, we wish to go to our cousin Bosambo," he said glibly.

Mr. Commissioner Sanders surveyed the men coldly.

"You are Liberian, but this man is from Senegal," he said.

Fendi was startled. This was the first white man he had ever met who could differentiate one tribe from another at a glance.

"Also, you must tell me why you wish to go to the Ochori. Once before a poor relation of Bosambo came here and there was trouble, for Bosambo is no rich man with alms to give."

"Nor are we poor men, lord," said Seluki eagerly. "I bring a bag of silver and I have a book for money."

He produced before the sceptical commissioner a bag of veritable cash. The three boxes that had been landed on the beach were not opened.

"Go with God," said Sanders, "you and the Senegalese. But this is a wild country, and here there are many bad men. You shall not blame me if your money goes in the night."

Fendi smiled to himself.

THEY engaged paddlers from Chubiri to take them upstream. But long before they reached the Ochori country Bosambo had news of their coming, for Sanders had sent him a pigeon message; but, as the commissioner had not mentioned the bag of silver, Bosambo's greeting lacked cordiality.

The long journey upriver had been profitable in one respect. Fendi, like other natives of the coast, had a smattering of all the dialects; by the time they reached the Ochori city he was as proficient in Bomongo as his companions. He was not particularly happy.

"This country is one large morgue," he grumbled. "There isn't ten cents in any of these villages. Compared with them, a Harlem slum's like Riverside Drive. You've certainly got me for a sucker."

"You haven't seen the big stuff yet," said Seluki mysteriously, and Fendi grunted.

Fendi had the instincts of a gangster, and, providing there were any pickings to pick, he saw the immense possibility of this land which had distance without communication.

"It seems to me," he said, the day before they reached the Ochori, "there's no gat in the country, except them that the soldiers have got down to the mouth of the river."

Seluki explained the law. Firearms were

prohibited. He had already told his friend that.

"I know," said Fendi, "but naturally I thought there would be a bit of graft here; someone must be running guns on the side."

He was impressed by the bulk of Bosambo, a little irritated by his hauteur.

"I see you, man," said Bosambo, addressing his fellow countryman Seluki. "I see you, yet I do not know you. I have nothing to give you, and when you have slept you shall take your paddlers and return to your own home. Who am I that I should keep hungry men from Liberia?"

"O Bosambo," said Seluki loftily, "I ask nothing of you. I come as a giver."

He clapped his hands, and one of his men lugged forward the bag of silver, and Seluki carefully unrolled the top. Bosambo looked and blinked.

"Ah, now I see that you are my friend," he said enthusiastically. "Tell me, brother, does Sandi know you brought this great treasure for me?"

Seluki swallowed something.

"Sandi knows I have the money," he said, "but no man knows that I have brought this to you; for this is my own. Yet I will let you take all that your two hands can hold."

Bosambo stepped down from his stool and was about to plunge his hands into the bag, then stopped.

"First I will pray in my hut, for I am of the true faith, Seluki, and I will ask the guidance of the Prophet."

He was gone some time. When he reappeared he walked quickly to the bag, thrust in his hands and arms to his elbows, and Fendi gasped as he saw the amount that was removed. For some curious reason, money was not only held in the hands, but covered his arms like huge silver spangles.

"O ko!" said Seluki, in dismay.

Bosambo went straight to his hut, deposited the silver, and washed off the thick copal gum which he had spread on his arms. When he came back he was in the most amiable frame of mind.

"You shall sleep in my best hut, and tonight I will have a great dance for you. Tomorrow you shall sit in my palaver house on my right hand and my left, and the people shall do homage to you. As for that bag of silver, I will put it in a safe place."

"I know nothing safer than my own hut, Bosambo," said his guest with some acerbity.

There was a dance that night which was witnessed by two other strangers to the city. N'saki had come a long journey to make a palaver with Bosambo about a certain gold cup of curious design. . . .

After the dance Fendi saw a comely girl edging towards the select crescent of spectators. With a vanity which is eternal in man he thought her eyes were for him, and, detaching himself from the guests at a moment when all eyes were for the swaying bodies of the dancers, he came up to her.

"O woman, I am the man you seek."

Here he was wrong; but N'saki was an opportunist and knew him, by the quick reputation he had acquired, to be both rich and powerful.

"Tonight I shall sit in the little hut which has been made for me," he said. "Let us talk together and I will tell you of people like none other in the world."

She shook her head, which means "Yes." And that night she went to him, and, when she had the opportunity of talking, she told him of M'gama and the little golden cup. . . .

THREE days after, he took from one of his boxes a bundle of cloth and, unrolling this, exposed four automatics with appropriate et ceteras. He and Seluki left, ostensibly on a hunting trip, accompanied by three bearers. Near to the village of M'gama the bearers were to be sent back, but before that could happen an unfortunate thing occurred. One of the bearers was a spy of Bosambo's, sent to report on the doing of the strangers. He was an inquisitive man and he was curious to know what were the contents of the little bags which the adventurers carried strapped to their shoulders.

In the dark of the night he opened one and saw the automatics and the spare magazines, and took counsel with his fellows.

"O ko! These men carry the little-little guns that say 'ha, ha,' and this Bosambo must know."

As they squatted over their fire Fendi rolled over to his companion and woke him.

"These niggers have lamped the gats, Selu. They gotta be bumped."

The "bumping" occurred at daybreak. Two of the bearers fell in their tracks and never knew what hit them. The third, the spy, ran for it, the bullets whistling after him. It was Seluki who dropped him at the edge of the small stream, Busini; and Fendi, running up, saw the water pink with blood and the swirl of a quickly moving crocodile.

He went back, and with his companion hid the bodies of the carriers he had slain.

"If that jane plays square, we'll be outa this country before there's a breeze. French territory's forty-five miles due north—and I'm a French subject!"

The jane was waiting an hour's march away from the scene of the tragedy, and with her tall and statuesque lover, who leaned on a spear and said nothing.

Her first words were disconcerting.

"Show me your little-little gun that killed Bosambo's men."

Being vain, Fendi showed her the automatic. To his surprise she handled the weapon scientifically.

"These I have seen," she said. "Once there was a soldier of Sandi who loved me for a week, and he showed me these mysteries."

She pulled back the safety catch, deftly removed the magazine and replaced it, before she handed it back to the impatient gangster.

Her plan was simple. On the rind of the moon M'gama and the two old Keepers of the Treasure went out into the forest, throwing curses behind them and leaving their jujus to guard their path. So that any who followed or spied on them would be stricken blind and presently would be devoured inch by inch by a most terrible lizard.

"He will come this night," she said. "We will rest here until the trees go to sleep on the ground, and then I will show you the way."

AT SUNSET, when the shadows of the trees ran for enormous distances, she walked ahead of them into a gloom that became instantly night. The rind of the moon was in the sky when they reached their destination, and they squatted within sight of the forest path down which presently would come M'gama and the two trustees.

Punctually to the minute three figures

came out of the gloom and vanished, with N'saki and the two strangers on their trail. For an hour they walked noiselessly until they came to a small knoll where stood four trees, and at the foot of the knoll M'gama and his two companions halted and performed mysterious rites, and would have gone away again, only Fendi and his companions stood in their path.

"Now," said Fendi, when the three old men were tied securely, "tell me where this beautiful treasure is hidden."

He questioned them all night, using various methods. One old man died in the process, but the other two were dumb. He had a brief consultation with Seluki.

"We'll have to let up on these two old guys," he said. "Give 'um a rest, and maybe tonight they'll squeal."

"What about the jane?" asked Seluki.

Fendi looked over his shoulder at the girl and her motionless lover.

"They've gotta be bumped," he said.

It was not two days or three days or yet four when the last of the living men spoke, and for six hours Fendi and his friend dug into the solid earth. They recovered many things that remained of the loot of a forgotten African monastery, filched by Portuguese filibusters: cups and chalices and golden vessels, and a rotting bag of gold coins.

The lover did not assist in the digging, but he helped carry the treasure to the river that trickled into the French territory, and which was eight miles distant. He even stirred himself to steal a big canoe from an upriver village. He chose upriver because the canoe floated down with a very small expenditure of energy. In the canoe the treasure was loaded.

"All is well now," said N'saki, "and I will tell you an island where you may go and hide."

"Sure!" said Fendi. "But let's go back and see if there's anything we've left behind."

The four trudged back to the treasure hole.

"O man," said Fendi, feeling stealthily for his gun, "look deep in that hole and see if there is anything we have forgotten."

The lover swaggered forward and bent over, and Fendi's gun jerked up and spat fire. He turned, his pistol poised, but the girl had vanished. He saw an agitated movement of long grass and fired twice;

but when he dashed in the direction she had taken she was gone, and he could not find her.

"That's bad. We've got to catch that dame before she gets to the river," he said.

And then, unrolling his pack, he made a discovery.

"Where's that other gun?" he asked, and his face went gray.

For N'saki had once had a lover who taught her the mysteries of automatics.

Again he blundered through some undergrowth where he had detected a movement, and Seluki was close on his heels.

"I see you," said a hard little voice.

The men were so close to her that she could not miss. . . .

A PIGEON came to headquarters. Bones was hustled in the middle of the night onto the *Zaire* with twenty soldiers. And, steaming night and day, stopping only at the woodings, he came to the Ochori village, and a very serious Bosambo was waiting.

"Lord, there are guns in this country,"

he said. "Two men you sent to me went out in search of treasure, and they shot my private man. And because Sandi has said we must not go against guns, I sent for you."

Two of his fighting regiments were ready for the march. He strode by the side of Bones through the Ochori forest, and presently came to the village of M'gama. But M'gama was not there. Trackers found his body and brought Lieutenant Tibbetts to the spot. Earth had been turned here, and Bones pointed.

"Set your young men to dig with their spears."

They dug for a short time and presently they found Fendi and his friend, but nothing else.

"These men have been shot," said Bosambo. "Here are the little guns."

Four pistols lay in the hole. N'saki had no further use for them; she was paddling a laden canoe towards the French territory, singing a song that was all about her dead lover and the treasure that would bring her many successors.





CHAPTER I

ADVENTURE

A GIRL stood on a wharf in Salmon Bay looking at a fishing boat. Unmistakably she did not belong there. Women accustomed to boats have confidence in their presence. This girl was hesitant, clearly disturbed, and yet there was a flash of eagerness in her gray eyes. Despite the smartness of her costume, she gave the impression of a timid bather wavering before the plunge.

A man came slowly along the wharf. He was clearly at home as he stopped occasionally to look at one of the few boats moored there. His appraisals were swift and uncompromising until at last he halted beside the girl and shared her inspection of the craft before them.

"A sweet ship!" he exclaimed.

His voice was heavy and hoarse, had something of a bellow in it, and real enthusiasm. The girl started, looked again at the boat, then at the man.

"Is it?" she asked.

"A boat's a 'her', lady," he answered with a touch of reproof. "Give one a man's name and it makes no difference.

But this one, this *Gray Goose*, she's a sweet ship. Neat, trim, able to take care of herself anywhere, afraid of nothing—just like the girls today."

She turned now and looked at the man. Three things made him noticeable, even conspicuous. He was big; tall and broad but not too heavy. He had a huge red beard and a great shock of crinkly red hair. And he did not wear a hat. He was even a bit startling; and a way of carrying himself, an air of confidence and certainty, the reliant ring in his voice—these added to the effect.

"But it—she—is so dirty, and rough looking," the girl said.

"Few gallons o' paint is all she needs."

He walked away, to get a view of the *Gray Goose* from the stern, and his blue eyes were bright with approval when he returned.

"Sweet! Sweet!" he muttered. "Made to order. Those halibut boys know what's needed to go rampin' around the Gulf."

"You like her?" the girl asked with sudden interest and an appraising glance.

"Like her! I'd sell my soul for her, lady."

"Why don't you buy her?"

A Complete Novelette

OUT TO WESTWARD

*A Tale of a Quest for Gold in the Gulf of
Alaska, and of a Sinister Ship That Floated
Unmanned in the Lonely North Pacific*

By ROBERT E. PINKERTON

"I couldn't buy enough fuel to take her through the locks into Puget Sound," he laughed, and then he added almost fiercely: "But I'm sailing in her, this summer, out to the westward."

The girl started and looked again at the boat.

"Out to the westward!" she repeated. "That means Japan, and China. In that little thing?"

"It means across the Gulf of Alaska," he corrected. "And 'that little thing' can go anywhere."

"And you're sailing—in her?"

"Sure's she's moored to this wharf. I've been looking for her for a week. Now the boat part of it's settled, I start looking for a crew."

An amused twinkle came to the girl's eyes. She was a very attractive young lady, but most evidently a humorous sense permitted her to enjoy a situation in which a boat, an inanimate thing of wood and metal, had shoved her into the background. The man had not once looked at her.

"Then you are a fisherman," she said without any attempt to hide the twinkle.

"In my time I've fished for everything on this coast," he answered in a tone that

indicated his thoughts were elsewhere. "Seals, whales, sea lions, walruses, herring, cod, salmon and halibut—I've had a turn at 'em all. But this time——"

He was staring at the *Gray Goose*, had forgotten the girl. Her twinkle became impudent.

"Couldn't I go along, as cook or something?"

"You!" he bellowed as he whirled to face her.

"It sounds interesting, and I have never been on a boat."

He laughed, while his beard and hair vibrated and glistened in the sunlight.

"Out to the westward! It's no place for a woman."

"Not even as cook?"

"The cook'll have to stand a watch at the wheel, swing a pick and hammer, and——"

"Pick and hammer!" she interrupted. "On a fishing boat?"

Instantly he was confused, and after a swift scrutiny of her face he turned away. The girl laughed, and when he had walked a few yards she called after him:

"I should be permitted to go if I wish—on my own boat."

In an instant he was back.

"Your boat!" he roared. "You kiddin' me, lady?"

She drew a brown envelope from her hand bag, extracted a folded piece of heavy paper and handed it to him. The man glanced at it swiftly.

"May third!" he exclaimed. "That's today. What you buying a halibut schooner for?"

"I didn't buy it. My uncle died, left it to me."

He looked from her to the *Gray Goose*, then back again. There was no longer amazement in his blue eyes but swift appraisal.

"Still want to go—out to the westward?" he demanded.

"Of course."

"Got any money?"

"Not much."

"Then we'll have to get somebody who has. Your boat, my idea—that lets us in equal. I'm skipper, you're cook. Next thing we need is an engineer."

He turned, searching the floats and docks, as if he expected to pick up an engineer as he would a piece of scantling. And he did. A man was wandering toward them. He was small, wore an old blue suit and a cap. He was about to turn down another wharf when the red-headed one called to him.

"Why ain't you out with the halibut fleet?"

"I was sick this spring and——"

"Diesel?"

"Nothing else."

"Broke?"

"Just about."

"Want to take a chance on staying broke or making big?"

"Spill it."

The red-headed one glanced around.

"Time to eat," he said. "There's a restaurant up the street. We'll talk it over."

He turned abruptly and strode away. The girl laughed, and then suddenly started after him.

"What's up?" whispered the man in blue as he walked beside her.

"He'll tell us," she answered.

AT THE restaurant the red-headed man selected a table with care, in an empty corner with free space about them. A few mechanics and ship carpen-

ters were there, eating at the counter. At the tables was a sprinkling of truck drivers and clerks.

The red-headed man did not look at his companions, seated on either side of him, until their orders had been given and the food was served. He sat staring straight across the room, but when the waitress had gone he leaned forward, suddenly alive with enthusiasm.

"Here's the way she's rigged!" he began, and then, as his hoarse whisper boomed across the room, he looked furtively about and motioned them closer.

"When I was a kid, sealin'," he continued in a ludicrous squeak that brought a smile to the girl's lips and eyes, "we put in along the Aleutians for water. Never did know what island it was. Fog! Wouldn't know it again if I saw it. Fog most of the time there."

"But I found gold. A hunk of it! In a rock! I was only a kid. I was sealin'. One thing and another, I never got back. Then, halibutin', out o' Ketchikan, we put into a bay. Good as lost in that fog, the skipper was. And on the beach was a tent, and a fellow livin' there alone, and pounding ten dollars a day out o' the rock with a hammer. And I never knew what island that was!"

His voice had risen in his excitement and he paused to glare fiercely about the room. No one seemed to have heard.

"And you figurin' on huntin' through all those islands, hundreds of miles of 'em, for them two places?" the engineer asked in disgust.

"Them islands, and there's more'n hundreds of miles of 'em, has never been prospected," the red-head declared hotly. "That is, except in spots. Your prospector, he's a land man, and it's sea out there, Bering on the north, Pacific on the south. Those islands run from Alaska almost across to Asia. Nobody lives on a lot of 'em, and then mostly Aleuts. Inside is where men go for gold, but it's been found out there. One or two mines is paying good."

"I'd rather make five dollars a day in an engine room than ten beating rock in that fog," the engineer announced. "I've been to the westward."

"But you've got no chance o' making thousands in any engine room," the big man snorted. "That's the chance we run."

last fall in Juneau I got chummy with an old fellow. Living in a little boat, he was, at the docks. Nothing about Alaska he didn't know, inside or along the coast. He'd been to the westward. Twice he'd gotten a grubstake with a hammer. And he said if he was young again that's where he'd go, with three or four men and a good set o' tools and a good boat. Gas engine to run a little rock crusher. Expenses and more for sure. And always the chance o' hitting something big."

"Why didn't you go with him?" the engineer scoffed.

"He died last winter. Besides, his boat was too small. But he told me places. We got chummy. And I know of one outfit that took out fifty thousand dollars with a small mill."

It was enough. He sat back and waited. Alaska has always meant gold, though her fisheries have more than doubled the value of her mineral output and for a dozen years the production of copper has exceeded that of the precious metal.

It has always been like that, the world around. Gold explodes something in men's brain cells. There is no romance in coal or rich loam. A salmon cannery is not daring or exciting or stimulating.

The big man drew a hand from a pocket and placed a piece of rock on the table before him. It was polished from much handling. The girl had never seen gold in rock, but she knew it at once. She and the engineer reached for it, but he was quicker.

"What's the idea?" he asked after a moment's scrutiny.

"I've got the idea. The lady here has the boat. That lets us in equal. We're offering you a chance for running the engine, which makes it worth no more than half a share."

The engineer blinked, then frowned.

"Who's putting up the money?" he demanded. "Grub, tools, fuel oil—they cost."

The girl had wanted to ask the same question. She smiled when the big man turned and looked about the restaurant, just as he had looked about the wharves when he wanted an engineer.

"Three thousand dollars ought to do it," he muttered.

His eyes rested on a table in another corner, where a young man sat alone.

Most evidently he did not belong in that waterfront eating house. He was dressed too well, his manner was what one might expect in the New Washington or the Olympic, and his expression indicated that he was both interested and amused by his surroundings.

The big man beckoned and the young fellow arose and strolled across.

"We want three thousand dollars," the red-head began at once.

"Certainly," was the instant reply. "Cash or check?"

"No kiddin'. You got it?"

"May I sit down?" And the young man bowed to the girl.

"Sure you can, if you've got three thousand," the heavy voice boomed.

The newcomer took the fourth chair and drew a check book from a pocket.

"Three thousand, four hundred and fifty-eight," he said. "There may be a check or two against this that I don't recollect—the last two days." And he grinned.

The red-headed man reached out, took the book, read the figures on the stub, and when he handed it back he passed over the luncheon check.

"You can begin now," he said.

CHAPTER II

OUT ON THE TIDE

THE *Gray Goose* was a year old, a well-built, modern halibut schooner sixty-five feet long. She had made one trip to the Alaskan banks the previous fall and then the illness, and ultimate death, of her owner had kept her moored in Salmon Bay.

The big man with the red hair and beard led his companions aboard her, hustling them away from the restaurant, giving them no opportunity to talk or ask questions. Once on deck, he took a bunch of keys from the girl and unlocked pilot house, engine room and forecastle.

Up and down steps he plunged in a swift examination that bewildered the girl and the young man but seemed to satisfy him. The engineer had disappeared into the engine room.

"Made to order," the big fellow boomed when the three gathered in the pilot house. "Where's the runt?"

The engineer appeared, his face beaming.

"Whoever built this boat knew what was what," he announced enthusiastically.

"Are you trying to make me believe three thousand dollars will buy it?" the young fellow demanded.

"Buy her!" the big man scoffed. "She cost thirty thousand if she cost a cent. But we're not worrying about that. We own her."

The girl started, then laughed. The young fellow glanced quickly from one to the other.

"A strange coincidence," he said. "Thirty thousand is what I had a year ago. In view of what happened to the twenty-six thousand or so, I don't want to appear niggardly, or even suspicious, but—the bottom of the sock, you know. Who are 'we'?"

"The ship's name is the *Gray Goose*," the red-headed one stated bluntly. "It's painted on the stern. My name's John Reach. What's yours, lady?"

"Nell Gray."

"Yours?" and the big fellow turned to the engineer.

"Good lord!" the owner of the check-book exclaimed. "Don't you people know each other?"

"Never laid eyes on one of you till today," Reach answered.

"And I've been counting myself an outsider. Let's get the formalities over with. My name is Howard Boyd, from San Francisco. I'm certainly glad to know you all."

His eyes were twinkling, and they found an answering twinkle in Nell Gray's

"I," the engineer stated pretentiously, "am Jefferson Martyn—t-y-n."

Again the twinkling eyes met, but John Reach snorted.

"T-y-n! What sort of title is that?"

"It's the way I spell my name," Martyn stated stiffly.

"It fits you. T-i-n-y—'Tiny'. But we got no time to waste. Let's get busy."

Nell Gray and Howard Boyd dined together that night in a restaurant off Second Avenue.

"Of course," he said, "this thing is not going through."

"Of course not," she laughed, and she recounted her first meeting with John Reach.

"The thing for you to do is sell that

boat and put the money in a bank."

"And for you to keep yours there."

"I'm not worrying about that. It might as well go one way as another. But you—a crowd of unknown men! Reach is a buccaneer. No telling what he's up to. He could have found that gold anywhere. Once he has the boat and the money, he could drop us overboard, out at sea."

"Of course. But it has been fun. I've never had an adventure. And he never gave me a chance to say yes or no."

"My check book was mine one moment, his the next."

"I'll write him a note, tell him I've decided not to go, that I'll sell the *Gray Goose*."

They laughed, at John Reach's presumption, at Jefferson Martyn's name, at the whole amazing, delightful adventure on Seattle's water front. Nell Gray had earned her living as bookkeeper in a Tacoma bakery, had been constricted since she was sixteen by the necessity of making a way in the world. The day had been one of delight, of zestfully skirting a new realm of romance.

Howard Boyd, unexpectedly confronted with a legacy a year before, had confined the evaporating process to San Francisco and that part of it where money is converted most readily into lurid vapors. A whim had transferred his activities to Seattle and a vivid week had left him confronted with a vanishing bank account and a sudden realization that he hadn't been getting his money's worth. He had always thought of fishermen as poor, hard working folk, but a chance encounter with a prodigal halibuter, fresh from the Gulf of Alaska, had led him to Salmon Bay.

They sketched these things to each other as they talked, and laughed at the thought of John Reach.

"He doesn't even know how or where to find us," Nell said. "If he never sees or hears from us again——"

"We'll drop him a note."

"Yes. Only——" and she started from her chair. "He has my keys!"

AT TEN o'clock the next morning, when Nell Gray and Howard Boyd walked out on the wharf at Salmon Bay, they found men swarming over the *Gray Goose*. Among them, directing, bellowing, was John Reach.

"But you can't do this!" Nell cried indignantly when he joined them. "It's my boat."

"You said you were going," Reach retorted in amazement.

"I'm not! I don't want to go. I'm going to sell the *Gray Goose*."

Reach plucked at his beard and watched the workmen.

"I thought you asked to," he said slowly. "We've got to hurry if we're going to do anything this summer."

"And all this labor—Miss Gray is responsible for it," Howard Boyd persisted. "You haven't any right to obligate her. This matter should have been thoroughly discussed and a decision reached."

"Decision! Didn't you agree yesterday? Weren't you for it? I didn't hear anybody say 'no.'"

"Nor 'yes'."

"You showed me your check book. What's the matter with you two, anyhow?"

He was so amazed and indignant Nell Gray found herself unable to reply, but Boyd was unimpressed.

"We know nothing about you—" he began.

"And what do you know about her, or about you?" Reach interrupted scornfully.

"What do we need to know about each other? I've sailed on many a ship but I didn't have to be introduced to every man jack aboard or know who his great-grandfather was, or how many times he'd been in jail. And as for knowing, what do I know about you? You might be a rum runner, a pickpocket or a preacher, for all I know—or care."

He turned away in disgust and bellowed an order to a painter, then strode away to see that it was executed.

"He seems to have a way with him," Boyd grinned. "But there must be some means of stopping this."

"I could call the police," Nell began, but she paused to stare at John Reach.

The big man was swinging himself aloft on the stays of the foremast, climbing hand over hand with startling speed. Once there he lent a deft hand to a rigger, slid back to the deck with a crash, jerked a blow torch from a painter, gave a demonstration of how to burn off paint and then, in answer to a hail, dashed below to the engine room.

"I'll end this," Howard Boyd said confidently.

He followed, peered down the hatch. Reach was helping Jefferson Martyn lift a piston, with connecting rod attached, from beneath the cylinder.

"Out of this, Tiny!" he laughed. "You're only in the way."

He turned the heavy burden over, set it down easily, wiped his hands on some waste and bolted up the ladder so swiftly Boyd barely escaped being knocked down.

"Say!" Reach exclaimed. "Last night I got a line on the machinery we want. Cheap, too. We'll go look at it before supper time. Second hand but in good shape."

A carpenter called from forward and Reach strode away. Boyd rejoined Nell on the float.

"You'll have to call out the army to get your ship back," he remarked.

"He's a brigand!" the girl exclaimed indignantly. "He's trying to rush us into this, and we don't even know what he intends to do."

"It wouldn't surprise me if he has some crooked scheme in which a boat is necessary. He'll probably get ready and skip without us."

"Everything he's done, the way he's acted, shows he isn't to be trusted," Nell agreed. "And one look at him, with that ferocious, hairy face——"

Reach was coming toward them with his customary speed.

"Say, lady," he began abruptly, "was you ever in Alaska?"

Nell shook her head.

"Then you've got something coming. You're going to like this cruise, aside from what we make out of it. Here in Puget Sound the land's just above sea level. It begins to climb after a bit. There's a hill or two in the San Juans, and then in B. C. we hit mountains. Right under 'em we go in places. You'd almost think they would topple right over onto the boat. There's snow on 'em, and no timber after a few thousand feet, and always the sea poking in among 'em, twisting and squirming for fifty and sixty miles.

"In B. C. you'll think you've seen something. It's great, all right. Takes your breath away. Only you won't breathe at all when you get to Alaska. Going up the inside passage—you just

won't believe it. Mountains, glaciers, icebergs floating in the channels—that's the way we got our ice when I first went fishing halibut—it's the greatest land I ever saw. Only——"

He turned, cast a swift glance the length of the *Gray Goose*, seemed to approve of the workmen's activities.

"Then outside in the gulf!" he exploded. "Lady, maybe you think there's ice and snow on Mount Rainier, but it ain't got enough to ice a fair catch o' fish. I'll show you a glacier a hundred miles across, and no man knows how thick. I'll show you mountains that'll make Rainier look like a wart. And I won't be sparin' of them. All at once you'll see 'em, stretching for hundreds of miles. We'll sail all day, and you'll think we haven't moved. You'll go to sleep, and when you get up in the morning they'll be there yet, stretchin' across the top o' the world, as white and as high as God."

It was not blasphemy. John Reach's big blue eyes were wide with the wonder of a sight he had often beheld, and which could still move him deeply. He stared, unseeing, for a moment, while Nell Gray and Howard Boyd stood in awe of this unexpected revelation.

And then, with a muttered oath, John Reach sped away to bellow at a rigger working on the foremast.

"He can't be very bad," Nell whispered after a moment. Boyd did not comment and the girl added in a wistful tone: "I've always wanted to see Alaska. My uncle, who built the *Gray Goose*, used to visit me once a year, in Tacoma. He told me about it, and he seemed to feel like this man does."

The busy scene on deck, the long floats and wharves, the masts of moored vessels, all disappeared from Nell Gray's sight. Big and rough, invariably drunk and yet curiously sedate and gentle, Martin Gray had brought to her constricted world an annual breath of romance. "Out to the westward" was a phrase often on his lips, and John Reach had used it. And, like John Reach, Martin Gray's rough hazardous life had never hardened him to the gloriously palisaded reaches of the inside passage or to the unbelievable panorama spread across the northern front of the halibut grounds.

Martin Gray had gone farther. The

first men to see that land, Bering, Chirikof, Cook, La Perouse, Lisianski, Vancouver, the Spaniards, poking the blunt noses of unwieldy sailing ships into fog-shrouded, unchartered waters, had aroused his admiration and interest. He knew the details of their voyages, had told Nell Gray much of them. In the end he had left her not only his ship but something of his spirit.

John Reach strode back. Howard Boyd was watching the girl, and something stilled his flippancy.

"Have you thought," Nell asked hesitantly as the big man stopped before her, "where my quarters will be?"

"Sure," he answered readily and without surprise. "I'll show you."

He led her to an open door aft of the pilot house. Here was a comfortable stateroom, plainly finished, blackened by sawmill cinders and disuse. Grimy blankets, a lumpy mattress and sagging springs had been thrown out on deck and a painter was preparing the woodwork for a fresh coat.

"The skipper's room," John Reach said. "The rest of us will bunk below aft. You'll have this and the fo'c's'le, where the galley is, to yourself. And I've ordered decent springs and a mattress, new blankets and some fancy curtains for the windows."

He rushed away and Nell Gray peeked inside.

"You won't know this place when I'm through with it," the painter boasted.

Nell pictured herself waking there, waking to the lift of the ship, to the swish of water, to glimpses of new islands, to the endless panorama of mountain and glacier which had so moved the big, rough, unknown man of the red hair. It was a mad, desperate thing, alien to all she had known, and yet she turned away with starry eyes. Howard Boyd had followed.

"I'm going," she said.

Boyd stared, then drew his check book from a pocket, waved it above his head.

John Reach came striding past. He halted, surveyed Boyd with something akin to accusation.

"Your money only buys you a share," he stated coldly. "Get some clothes for working and hurry back."

STRANGE days followed, days of doubt and questioning, of threatened disruption and disaster, days through which John Reach strode with an unbelievable vigor, with a roaring, scoffing voice, with his great shock of red hair and beard vibrating from ceaseless activity.

Once committed, Nell Gray did not waver. She had doubts of John Reach, frequent and serious. Jefferson Martyn, issuing in grease-coated clothing from the engine room, dropped disturbing remarks. The little man was pretentious but he had a humorous twist and even his forebodings brought a smile.

Howard Boyd's enthusiasm waned at times. He had been assigned to help Martyn and at night, when he and Nell dined uptown, he recounted the engineer's pessimistic statements.

"You haven't any business going," he protested. "There's no telling where this thing will end up."

"Between Martyn and Reach, I'd choose Reach," Nell answered. "He may be a pirate but he's an honest one. I mean, he wouldn't be tricky. And Martyn—I don't like little men."

In the end Howard desisted but he did buy Nell a significant present.

"Keep this gun hidden in your room," he said. "You may need it."

The girl wanted to refuse, to laugh at his fears, but she saw that he was really worried. And she knew Reach did not entirely approve of the young San Franciscan. Howard arrived late each morning. His hands were soft. He was inclined to stop work often, light a cigaret and watch the activity about him.

The big man was everywhere, driving, remorseless. To Nell it seemed chaos, an impossibility, and yet one evening, a week after her first sight of John Reach, he announced they would sail in the morning.

He had them up early and they drew away from the wharf and down to the oil dock, where the last of Boyd's money and a bit of Nell's slender savings went for fuel oil and kerosene for the galley stove.

"We're short-handed," Martyn whispered to Boyd as the oil gurgled into the great tanks. "Reach will keep us all working eighteen hours a day."

"Not me! I bought myself a share in this, not a job."

"He's the sort that will manhandle you,

once we are at sea. And as for shares—me working like a dog, having the responsibility of keeping this boat going, and getting only a seventh."

When the tanks were full and the bill was settled, Howard went forward to cast off the bow line.

"Let that be!" Reach roared from the pilot house. "I'm telling when on this ship."

He was looking out a window, not at Boyd but at a tugboat that was drawing in to the dock astern. That morning his restless energy had produced everyone. Now he leaned indolently out the window, apparently unmindful of the tide he had wanted to catch in Puget Sound. The big Diesel was turning over slowly, everyone was waiting, and John Reach stared at the tug.

It drew in and a little old man leaped from the bow and made fast a line.

"Willie!" Reach shouted. "Willie! Come here!"

"What you want?" demanded a high, shrill voice.

"Come aboard! Be quick about it! We're sailing—out to the westward."

The little old man calmly surveyed the *Gray Goose*, then boarded the tug and went below. Reach waited patiently for a few moments, finally ordered Boyd to cast off. He himself drew in the stern line, then returned to the wheel.

He was at the pilot house door when Willie appeared, carrying a half filled canvas sack and yellow oilskin. He leaped from the tug's bow to the *Gray Goose's* stern, set down his bundle and began to coil the rope Reach had dropped there.

Nell was standing on deck amidships. Boyd came aft to join her and Martyn stepped out of the engine room hatch. They stared at the stranger, who skilfully and quickly completed his task and started forward.

The girl drew back as he approached. He not only seemed to have started life as a small man but to have shriveled, and he surveyed the trip with one glittering black eye. A wide, ghastly scar, from hair roots to jawbone, told where the other eye had gone, and he was left with a countenance more than ferocious. It was fiendish.

The *Gray Goose* had pulled away from

the dock and Reach looked out of the pilot house door.

"We're sailing to the westward, Willie," he said. "You share an eighth, same as the engineer. Go forward and show this young hand how to coil down that line."

CHAPTER III

THE LONG SWELL

A LANDSMAN, outfitting a craft for his first voyage, gains a complete misconception of the sea. In Salmon Bay, with the *Gray Goose* moored to a dock, Nell Gray and Howard Boyd learned to know the halibut schooner as something rigid and stable. They became familiar with every part of her, accustomed to her solidity.

The tide met the wind in Puget Sound and off Port Townsend that first day, the southeaster was still roaring when they entered the Gulf of Georgia, and it was not until the second morning, when they were in Johnstone Straits, that the girl or the young man appeared on deck.

Hunger drove them to the forecabin, where they found Jefferson Martyn eating a meal that had been prepared by the latest addition to the crew.

"You didn't get very far with your mutiny yesterday," the engineer grinned.

Boyd flushed angrily. He had protested to Reach that he had no right to take on a stranger and give him a share in the enterprise, and had insisted that the little old man with one eye be put ashore.

But they were approaching the locks when he faced Reach and the big man, bellowing orders, busy maneuvering the *Gray Goose*, had driven him forward to handle the bow line. Boyd flushed now because he had obeyed, because, after a confident assertion that he would handle the affair, he had succumbed before Reach's personality and threats.

Then, once clear of the locks, a gray squall had enveloped them, the schooner had rolled with the first swell working in past West Point, and stinging, driving rain had driven them to shelter. Now Boyd was facing Nell for the first time since his humiliation.

"This Willie can cook," Martyn continued. "Maybe Reach was right when he said we'd be glad more'n once we had

him aboard. He stood his trick at the wheel, took care of the oiling after I turned in at midnight, and rustled grub. You two," and he glanced slyly at them, "ought to be thankful. He's done your work as well as his own."

Nell ignored the taunt.

"They had it fixed up from the first!" she exclaimed. "John Reach has been rushing things, driving everyone, but when we had taken fuel he waited, watching that tug come in."

"Sure," Martyn agreed quickly. "Did you notice that this Willie never asked where we were going or what we were after? He just grabbed his few clothes and tumbled aboard."

"I never saw a more fiendish expression on a man!" Nell cried. "There's nothing he wouldn't do."

"A fine pair, him and Reach," the engineer said. "Old One Eye—he's got notches in his knife."

"But what's their game?" Boyd demanded.

"Game!" Martyn repeated. "In the North Pacific, with Japs, Chinks, rum, hop, fish pirates, seals! With a ship that can go anywhere! With two men like Reach and this Willie running her! You can be sure of one thing. They'll not waste time hunting for gold along the beach."

Silence greeted his statement. Nell glanced apprehensively toward the companionway.

"I'm not worrying," Martyn continued. "Reach knows a Diesel can push a boat but that's all. Whatever he's up to, he's got to have me."

"There must be something we can do!" Nell protested. "I own the *Gray Goose*. I have some rights. Can't we stop at a town, or hail a ship?"

"No chance, with Reach and Willie at the wheel. Boyd here is to be turned over to me for oiling and it will be night and day, with no stops, until we get to where we are going."

"But what can Reach do?" Boyd objected. "There's no cargo and, so far as I can see, no way of getting one."

Martyn had finished eating and was filling his pipe. He leaned back in his seat while he puffed slowly.

"That would be the easiest and crookedest part of it," he said at last. "And

when two men run a boat that cost 'em nothing they'll take most any kind of chances. I never heard of its being tried, but a boat like this, looking like any one of a hundred other halibut schooners, could run to the Pribilofs and, fog helping, load up with sealskins that would bring a good price in China or Japan.

"Cargo! We're in B. C. now, and ahead of us is Alaska, where it's mostly loggers and miners and fishermen, men who like their liquor. This packet could carry enough to clear a hundred thousand dollars, and once it was landed Reach wouldn't care what happened to the boat."

"The *Gray Goose* a rum runner!" Nell cried. "The Government would seize it and we——"

"Take China," the engineer continued. "Think of the profit on a cargo of machine guns and rifles and automatics! Or what if we met a Canadian liner off the Aleutians and a Chinese steward dropped a good lot of opium overboard? Or supposin' the Aleuts have been picking up sea otter the last year or two, and Reach, or another partner, has gathered a big bunch of pelts. No cargo, but another hundred thousand profit there."

Nell and Howard were silent.

"See it!" Martyn exclaimed. "The North Pacific—there's all sorts of chances for a crook. And Reach—this Willie hopping aboard all ready at the last minute—an empty hold! They've got your boat and your money. They'll probably keep you both, long as they need you, and then——"

H E AROSE and went on deck. Nell stared at Howard. They had had good times in Seattle those first days. He had been assured, pleasant, an agreeable companion. With Martyn clearly taking refuge behind Reach's need of him to run the engine, from Howard alone could she expect help.

"Isn't there some way you can get the better of those two men before it's too late, while we are still in the inside passage?" she demanded suddenly.

"I'd have a fine chance, tackling that red-headed giant!" he retorted, and then, when he saw the scorn in her eyes, he added desperately: "But I won't lay down to Reach. And there's more than one way——"

He broke off when he heard a heavy step on deck. A moment later Reach descended the stairs. He grinned when he saw the two sitting at the table.

"Able to eat now, are you?" he taunted good-naturedly.

"Look here!" Howard exclaimed. "You've got to put that old man off the boat."

"Who? Willie?" the big fellow demanded in amazement. "You don't know how lucky we are to have him!"

"We don't know, and we don't want him. You have no right to determine who will share in this enterprise."

"But we need Willie," Reach protested seriously. "Think I can stand at that wheel twenty-four hours a day? You couldn't help when we had a little breeze yesterday. And out to the westward, running night and day, with fog, gales, down among those islands—Willie can smell his way there."

He was no longer gruff and domineering but his blue eyes were alight with excitement. Nell had seen this childlike quality in the man before and remained silent.

"Ever read a book called the *Sea Wolf*?" Reach asked. "That was supposed to be McKane, you know, and Willie—he was McKane's first mate. Nova Scotian, like McKane, and tough! There was never anything like him his size on this coast. And now we've got him!"

He beamed upon them and Howard, encouraged by this enthusiasm, pressed his point.

"It doesn't make any difference who Willie was," he announced. "You had no right to take him into partnership without consulting us."

"Don't you worry about Willie," Reach assured them easily. "He'll earn his way, and then some."

For him, the subject was closed. He finished his meal. Nell rose from the table and turned to the stove. Dresser and sink were piled high with dishes used during the previous day and night.

"Got behind, didn't you, cook?" Reach laughed. "I'd have Howard here help you get caught up but he's got to stand watch and watch with Tiny in the engine room and he's a lot to learn. He'd better go down there now and start in."

The young man jumped to his feet.

"I turned my money over to you!" he cried angrily. "And that's all I did. I'm not going to be kicked around like a deck hand."

"Nobody's kicking you—yet," Reach answered imperturbably. "But the ship never sailed that didn't need a skipper, and it was decided that I'm skipper of this packet. The rest of us have been standing double watches for twenty-eight hours and you ain't lifted a hand since we left the locks."

The big man leaned back and filled his pipe. Howard was about to break forth again when Reach spoke sharply.

"Git aft, there! You belong to the black gang from now on."

Slowly he arose to his feet. Howard, pale with anger, stood at the foot of the steps in an attitude of defiance. Nell turned and plunged into her task.

"The lady, she's no quitter," Reach said. "She's bucklin' into her job fine. Maybe if you worked alongside o' her you'd get the right idea. Pitch in and help with those dishes."

He went on deck without waiting to see if the order were obeyed. Howard took it without a word, and when the big man had gone he continued to stand there.

"The tea towels are hanging behind you," Nell said coldly.

It was as if a spring had been released. Howard leaped up the steps. After a moment Nell heard a loud voice and heavy feet on deck, then several resounding smacks. A moment later Howard's feet dangled through the hatch and he fell in a heap.

"Next time I hit you I'll shut my hand first," Reach called down. "Lady, if he's not smart with them dishes, let me know."

When Howard had picked himself up, Willie came down and sat at the table. No one spoke. Nell saw that the old man's eye glared less ferociously and she remembered what Reach had told of their long hours on duty. She flew into action and soon had food before him.

Willie ate sparingly, and in silence, then departed. Nell cleared the table and returned to the sink. Howard followed with a tea towel. He said nothing and the girl did not look at him until the task was finished.

"I've got a fine chance against a deep sea bully," Howard remarked when he

caught her glance. "He'd only beat me up."

"I'd prefer that," Nell retorted coldly.

DAY and night the big Diesel motor drove the *Gray Goose*, and there was little change from the second day. Anger and a job carried Nell across Queen Charlotte and Milbanke Sounds without another attack of seasickness. Howard stuck to the engine room and his bunk aft and Martyn appeared on deck only at mealtime.

Occasionally, when the two were alone in the pilot house at the change of the watch, Reach's roaring laugh and Willie's shrill cackle were heard, but there was no mirth for the others.

Late in the morning of the fourth day Martyn entered the forecabin for his breakfast.

"Remember how you were going to be shown mountains and glaciers and ice bergs?" he asked Nell. "Going to see what a grand land Alaska is?"

Something in his tone caused her to look at him closely.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"All that sort of thing's back there," he answered as he pointed astern. "When I came on deck I saw Forrester Island dropping into the mist."

"You mean we are not going to Alaska?" the girl demanded.

"We're headed straight out into the North Pacific," Martyn answered. "I suspected something when I felt this ground swell. We'd have had only a couple of hours of it if we'd crossed Dixon Entrance, and we'd have been in Ketchikan by noon. Now—" and he paused significantly.

"But where can we be going?" Nell cried.

"Only John Reach and Willie know. There's China, Japan, Siberia, the Aleutians, Bering Sea, seals, piracy, most anything, ahead of us."

CHAPTER IV

THE ISLAND

ONE hundred miles beyond Forrester Island the *Gray Goose* encountered a heavy ground swell rolling in from the southwest. Nell Gray was in the galley washing the supper dishes. Queen Charlotte and Milbanke Sounds had pre-

pared her for the motion of the open sea but not for this. She was not ill, though the long, swooping motion of the ship made her work difficult.

The gale came before she had finished. After that first heavy squall she climbed the steps and looked aft. Between sheets of spray she could see both Reach and Willie in the pilot house. Reach waved her back and a moment later he entered the forecabin, his oilskin running streams, his heavy red beard dripping.

"Better stay here for the night," he said. "She's going to blow."

There was boyish anticipation in his voice.

"But why can't I sleep in my own room?" she protested.

A heavy wave struck the port bow and there was a thud of water on deck.

"That's why," Reach grinned. "No one will be able to go aft or forward in half an hour. Can we have some bread and a few cans of things? No use in starving ourselves."

Nell remembered how, when she thought it was rough, Reach and Willie had passed easily from pilot house to fo'c's'le, and then another avalanche of water over her head told what she could expect. She knew where they were, heading out into the largest ocean on the globe, but her growing terror was stilled by a cheerful whistle as Reach opened a locker and selected several tins of food.

"You don't seem to worry," she said hesitantly.

"Worry, lady!" he laughed. "In the *Gray Goose*? Watch her tonight. You'll be proud of your ship."

She saw him go aft, awaiting his opportunity in the shelter of the booby hatch and then running swiftly along the flooded deck. And a little later, in a lull between squalls, she saw his face through a pilot house window, and Willie's, and both were grinning.

Except for occasional glimpses of a man in the pilot house, Nell saw no more of her companions for forty-eight hours. That night she lay wedged in a berth, stunned by the crashing of water only a few inches from her head. The noise was tremendous, and always above it was the terrifying sound of the wind. At midnight she thought there could be no hope of survival. At dawn she marveled that she was still

alive, and a pride in her ship began to grow.

But with daylight the gale increased. Nell knew, from the vibration, that the motor had been slowed down. Now she heard shouts on deck and in fresh terror she clawed her way to the stairs and looked out from the shelter of the hatch.

Reach and Willie were only a few feet away, sometimes up to their waists in water, clinging to ropes when the waves broke over, shouting and hauling away at halyards. Each moment Nell expected to see them washed away, but they hung on until the foresail, reefed to a mere rag, was raised and sheeted home. Then, grasping a favorable opportunity, they ran aft. Through a pilot house window, Nell had seen Martyn at the wheel. Reach took his place and a little later the vibration of the motor ceased.

All day and all night the *Gray Goose* was hove to, rising and falling with the heavy seas. Sometimes Nell looked out and saw a face through the streaming pilot house windows, but otherwise there was no sign of life aboard the vessel.

In the end she became accustomed to the thunder of the water, to the fearful blows on the bow of the little ship, to the screaming of the wind. Fear became commonplace, and was dulled. Late in the afternoon she fell asleep in her berth.

The clatter of a stove lid awakened her, and in gray daylight she saw Willie starting a fire. She had not removed her clothing and in a moment she was at his side.

"This is my job," she said.

"You've had quite a holiday," Willie cackled shrilly.

She looked at him in surprise. There was a trace of sociability in his tone, though his one eye glared ferociously. His face was a bit gray from fatigue and she saw that his hands trembled a little.

"You men must be starved, and worn out!" she exclaimed with sudden sympathy.

"It was a short one," he answered. "She don't blow hard this time o' year. And then, in this ship—she's sweet. See the way she's been riding. We'll have power on her again soon."

The motion was so terrific that Nell worked about the stove with difficulty, but the wind did not scream so loudly and only occasionally was there a crash of water on deck. She was about to speak again

when she saw that the old man had gone to sleep on a bench at the table. Then a heavy lurch sent him sprawling to the floor.

"What's the matter o' me?" he demanded shrilly as he resumed his seat. "Never did that before. Never needed sleep. 'S what power does to you. With sail, rampin' around these waters, I could stay awake with the best of 'em. Power does it. Softens a man."

"You've had too much of it!" Nell exclaimed, and the sudden sympathy surprised her now.

"You mean I'm too old, eh?" he cackled angrily. "I'm not. I'm only fifteen years older'n John Reach and he's just growned. John's fifty, the best age for a man. Me—I'll go to sea for a long while yet."

He squared around to face her and his eye blazed hotly. She said no more.

DAY and night they kept on to the westward. Another gale found them, a southeaster, before which they drove for a while until forced to heave to. Again crashing seas separated Nell from the other four. Her fear grew less but did not entirely vanish. Sometimes, when she looked aft from the hatch and saw the huge seas racing past, the *Gray Goose* rising and plunging, she felt a great pride in her ship, a wonder that it could survive in such a turmoil.

Nell saw, too, that gales and adversity produced different effects in her companions. When Reach came down to the fo'c's'le for his meals his blue eyes were shining and his red hair and beard vibrating, while his bellowing laugh rivaled the sound of water against the hull. Willie, a strange, ferocious looking little gnome, softened when he spoke of the ship.

Jefferson Martyn, Nell thought, was a landsman at sea. He appeared to have no interest in the ship or the weather. Beyond the big Diesel motor, which he assumed was the heart and salvation of the *Gray Goose*, his one interest was speculation as to the purpose Reach had in getting control of a boat and striking out into the wide Pacific.

THE tenth morning out of Dixon Entrance, Nell hurried through her morning work and went on deck. There was no wind, and through the long days she had become accustomed to the

long ocean roll. She looked around eagerly, but a gray curtain hid the sea a half mile away.

As she stood there, shivering in the cold, damp air, she felt the motor slow down. Immediately Willie came forward and stood at the bow, where he clung to the forestay and looked ahead.

Nell went aft to her room and put on warm clothing. When she returned to the deck Willie was still forward. Reach, at the wheel, was staring out a window, and he was tense, watchful.

For half an hour nothing happened. The fog gradually closed in, chilling, smothering. Nell saw Martyn at the engine room hatch.

"What are they doing?" she whispered.

"Hunting for land, and it's the Pribilofs. Twice since breakfast I've seen fur seals."

He looked around, listened a moment.

"If this fog holds, we're all right," he commented. "If it lifts, look out. We'll be a target for a revenue cutter, and they won't give us more than one warning shot."

He ducked below and Nell went forward to the pilot house door. Reach was watching Willie, seemed unmindful of her presence. The tense attitudes of both men, the fog, their creeping progress, Martyn's forebodings, all had their effect. Nell found herself stiff from suspense and fear.

Suddenly Willie raised a hand, jerked it downward. Reach pulled the whistle cord and Nell leaped at the short, harsh blast. Martyn came boiling out of the engine room hatch, followed by Howard.

"The fools!" the engineer muttered. "Asking for an echo and advertising we're here."

The whistle sounded again. Willie was staring into the fog. Reach stood in the pilot house door, watch in hand.

"Listen!" Martyn whispered. "Surf!"

The *Gray Goose* crept slowly ahead. The whistle sounded occasionally and the booming noise of water dashing against rocks became greater. Soon they heard it on either side, and Willie was swinging the lead.

"They'll pile us up," Martyn said to Nell and Howard. "It's thick as pea soup. No man can tell where he's going."

"But why go in here, wherever it is?" Boyd asked. "They could wait for the fog to clear."

"What do they care? The boat didn't cost 'em a cent."

He walked to the rail as if he would see farther into the dense blanket. Nell became aware of Reach's tension, and of the fact that all motion had suddenly ceased, that the *Gray Goose* was as stable and solid as when she had been lying at the Salmon Bay Wharf.

Willie walked aft and spoke to Reach. The whistle was tooted often now, and echoes were snapping back from either side.

"What does it mean?" Nell whispered as the little old man ran forward and resumed sounding.

"Ask Reach," Martyn scoffed.

Reach had thrown the clutch into neutral and now he spoke for the first time.

"Get forward, Tiny," he bellowed out the door. "You know how that winch works. Let go the hook when Willie gives the word."

The word came soon afterward. The fast running chain cable rattled out and the *Gray Goose* swung half around and lay still.

Nell looked about but could see nothing. She knew they were anchored, and yet there had been no sight of land. There was something ghostly and ominous about it all. Reach had not relaxed but was still staring out the door. Involuntarily, the girl stepped closer to Howard and Martyn.

"This is it," Howard whispered. "The thing we've been talking about and waiting for."

Nell shivered. Adventure had been a brilliant, enticing thing, down there on the solid wharves of Salmon Bay, the familiar city before her, the warm sun shining, the air vibrating with normal sounds.

This was very, very different. No stage curtain had ever veiled such suspense. The surf and the shrill cry of a gull seemed part of the oppressive silence. The chill could be only a forerunner of disaster.

A little breeze came, driving the fog against their faces. Again Nell shivered. Howard watched anxiously. Martyn swore in a low tone.

"A fine mess of it!" he growled. "Only two men in the whole world know where we are or why we are here, and they won't tell."

Reach came out on deck and went forward with Willie. The fog was thinning before the breeze. Long wisps of it flowed past the *Gray Goose*. The surf boomed. The chill bit through heavy clothing.

"There's land!" Howard exclaimed, and he pointed.

Nell saw only a black shadow through the fog, but it darkened as she watched, and then came a light line which, after a moment, she recognized as a sand beach.

The curtain lifted quickly then. Rather it was swept aside. The beach spread along a great crescent. Behind it, rocks rose to hills, bare and dreary. Nell had shivered from the cold, and now she shivered again, from the desolate, inhospitable aspect of this strange land. She was startled by a roar from forward and turned to see Reach running aft.

"How about Willie now?" he demanded. "Didn't I tell you he could smell his way among these islands? But he's done more than that. Look!"

He was tremendously excited, and he swept an arm toward the beach and the barren rocks.

"Look!" he roared again. "This is the place where I saw the tent! And the prospector pounding out ten dollars a day with a hammer! You're after gold! There it is!"

CHAPTER V

DISSENSION

NELL GRAY laughed. It was not an hysterical outburst, nor did it even express relief. A moment before she had stood there shivering from the cold and from the nameless terror hidden by the fog, from the uncertainty generated in the long days of doubt and suspicion, but her laugh was one of pure mirth.

The echo of it came back from the shore while John Reach stared at her, and while Howard Boyd and Martyn still stared at Reach. Then Nell's eyes caught Howard's and the twinkle in them compelled the young man to laugh.

But when she looked at Martyn there was no answering gleam of levity or even of relief. The engineer was not so much surprised as sullen. There was a thwarted,

vicious expression in his face she had not seen before.

"Ain't this what you wanted?" Reach demanded resentfully but without suspicion. "Didn't we start out for here? Didn't I tell you Willie would more than earn his share?"

No one answered, but Reach did not press the point. He turned and examined the beach, now much clearer. The sun was touching the hills beyond, the wind was driving the fog from the valleys.

"There!" the big man exclaimed, pointing. "That's where I saw the tent. Ten dollars a day! And only a hammer!"

He whirled from them and began to unlash the dories, roaring for Willie and Martyn to help him. Again Nell's eyes met Howard Boyd's, and both laughed.

But John Reach's fervor quickly undermined amusement and even relief. Less than a month before, they had pictured this moment, going ashore on strange, barren islands, searching eagerly and confidently for gold, finding it gleaming in rocks, in pebbles on the beach. Now they were about to do so.

Two hundred yards away, back of that long, curving strand, was that for which they had left Seattle. One man had extracted the precious metal from those rocks. With the crudest and simplest tools he had crushed and pried it from its hiding place.

Nell glanced at the hatch over the big fish hold amidships. Beneath it was machinery which would produce many times that obtained so laboriously by the wielder of the hammer. Aroused as men and women have always been by the thought of gold, the girl ran across the deck, grasped a fall and stood ready with the others to help hoist the dory over the rail and lower it into the sea.

Howard had caught the excitement now and was assisting, awkwardly but with a will. Willie's eyes gleamed more ferociously than ever, but Martyn, while brisk in his movements, was looking curiously from the shore to John Reach.

"Can we all leave the ship?" Nell asked as the men tumbled into the dory.

"With the big hook down, the top of the world could blow off in this hole and we'd never know it," Reach laughed. "All ashore!"

Nell followed over the side and Reach

manned the oars. He was like a boy on a picnic, laughing, his red hair and beard quivering, and he pulled with such strength the big dory swirled through the water.

Once ashore, all stood irresolutely for a moment. Reach made the dory fast to a drift log; then stood erect, and stared at the bare rocks.

"Here's where we cease being sailors," Nell laughed.

Her thought was only that the actual work of the expedition was about to begin and she was unprepared for the effect of her words on Reach. He looked inland uncertainly. All the decision and force they had known were gone.

"If it was fish, fog or a gale, Willie and I would know exactly what to do," he faltered. "Now——"

"The first thing is to find where the other man worked," Howard suggested. "Where was his tent?"

"It's six years ago," Reach said with hesitation. "As I remember——"

"There will be some traces of where he was," Nell stated confidently. "We'll find it."

"That's the ticket!" Reach agreed in relief. "Let's look about."

He started west along the beach, Willie beside him.

"We ought to go the other way," Howard suggested. "Reach doesn't seem to remember."

"Nothing to remember," Martyn sneered. "He was never here before."

"I believe he was," Nell retorted indignantly. "Just because he has disappointed you by not turning out to be a pirate is no reason for doubting him. The least we can do is look for traces of the prospector."

Martyn seemed about to make another sneering remark but his eyes fell before Nell's.

"No harm in it," he conceded ungraciously. "I'll go the other way."

He started off quickly, without giving them a chance to agree.

"A man wouldn't camp on the beach," Howard said. "Let's look farther back."

He and Nell began to search among the boulders.

"Martyn's had a grouch ever since we anchored," the girl whispered.

"All his prophecies of crime and bloodshed make him feel like a fool."

"You doubted Reach and Willie yourself," she reminded him.

"Of course. The whole thing was so fishy. But I'm glad I was wrong. Now—I wonder if there is any gold in these islands."

"Must be," Nell declared. "We'll find it. Look!"

Reach was calling them and they ran along the sand.

"Here's where his tent was," the big man shouted.

THEY saw a rough fireplace of blackened stones and a rectangle of rocks that had evidently held down the sides of a canvas shelter. A few rusty remains of tin cans, and a drift log from which firewood had been cut, completed the evidences of a camp.

"What would Martyn say to this?" Nell demanded excitedly as they searched for further clues.

No one answered. Willie had picked up some broken pieces of rock and they crowded about him.

"Can't see any gold in it," the old man announced. "Only looks like one of these boulders had been broken."

"At least it shows the man was a miner," Howard said. "The thing to do is find where he worked."

"Where'd Martyn go?" Reach asked.

"Said he'd search for the camp to the east. We might as well begin here."

They were tremendously excited. Reach's blue eyes were blazing. Even Willie looked at the bleak hills with absorbing interest.

"Maybe this creek leads to something," Howard said.

Reach leaped forward at once and the others followed to a small stream that entered the sea near by. But when they turned northward among the hills their impetuous rush ceased. The big man was ahead but he made heavy going of it. He had sure feet on a heaving deck but here, Nell saw, he stumbled often. The vigor and decision with which he had started quickly vanished.

"I spent my summers in the Sierras when I was a kid," Howard said. "Maybe it will help some here."

He took the lead and Nell followed. The girl laughed. She and Howard laughed easily in that first hour. Follow-

ing two weeks of suspense and fear, their spirits had expanded immeasurably.

But after an hour of climbing, of fruitless searching for evidence of the work of the prospector whose camp they had found, they began to realize that a gold-seeking expedition was something more than picking the precious metal out of rocks. Breathless, her high spirits dulled, Nell sat down on a boulder as they came out on the crest of a low ridge.

"Now where do you suppose that fellow was pounding rock?" Reach asked in frank perplexity.

Nell whirled to look at him. She had been startled before by this open, boyish quality in the man. It was what had led her to doubt Martyn's conjectures, but now it aroused a new thought.

"It wouldn't help us a great deal," she said. "We came to find gold where no one else has found it. Why bother with what he did?"

She looked, too, at the others. Willie had frankly counted himself out of it. He did not even show an interest in land affairs. Howard Boyd had been an agreeable companion in the city but he had failed to show strength once they were at sea. Martyn was a grouch, a little man who could only sneer at the efforts of others. Clearly the problem was up to her.

"Who do you suppose was the first man who found gold?" she demanded.

The three men looked at her in astonishment.

"Whoever he was, he'd never found it before," the girl continued in a sharp, determined tone. "But he learned, and so can we. Now listen! We've been ashore an hour, and we've given up hope. If gold was to be picked up by anyone it would have been gone long ago. Maybe we don't know much about prospecting but we can find out. There is a whole summer to do it in. The ship's stocked with food. We've nothing else to do. So let's get busy."

"Something's been said!" Willie cackled, his one eye turned upon Nell in fierce approval. "And if we don't find it here we'll try another island. There's lots of 'em."

John Reach did not speak, but there was nothing dumb about his eyes as he looked at the girl.

"You're the skipper!" Howard exclaimed

with frank admiration. "What are the orders?"

"First of all, we'll go back to the ship and have a meal," Nell answered. "Then we'll go at this thing right."

THEY descended to the creek and followed it out to the beach. The dory was still there, but Martyn had not returned. As they were about to shove off he ran onto the beach a quarter of a mile to the eastward.

"Wonder what he's been doing?" Willie growled.

They waited until the engineer came up. Several times, as he hurried along the sand, he glanced back at the hills, and when he stopped before them, panting, there was no mistaking the fear in his eyes.

"What's happened to you?" Reach demanded.

"It won't happen again," was the answer. "You don't get me off this beach."

"Got lost, eh?"

"I'll say I did. Try going back among those hills once. I came near sitting down to wait for you to blow the whistle. What if fog comes in?"

"We didn't get lost," Nell said shortly. "And we were back in the hills."

"You were, eh? Well, where's the gold?"

"We've been looking for the place where the prospector worked, but we haven't found it," Howard explained.

"And you won't. You can't tell me there's gold in such rock."

"But it is where John saw the prospector pounding out ten dollars a day. We found his camp."

"Did you see him working?" Martyn demanded of Reach. "Did you see any gold?"

"He just told me what he was doing," the big man admitted. "Two of us went ashore from the halibut schooner. The fog lifted right after and the skipper got out."

"And for all you know he may have been crazy, or up to something else, or just a plain liar."

"If you're so certain there's no gold here, you must know something about prospecting," Nell interrupted.

"What? Me? I was never near a gold mine in my life."

"Then what makes you so certain?"

"Common sense," the engineer retorted. "Everybody knows gold comes in that

white rock they call quartz. See any here?"

No one answered. Reach took out the piece of rock he had carried for thirty years and the others gathered around.

"That's it," Martyn said. "Look back in those hills. If there was quartz we would see it from here."

There were no comments. Reach stood looking at the piece of ore.

"Mean to tell me you organized this affair, spent all that money, came all this way, and no one in the crowd knows anything about prospecting?" Martyn demanded.

There was a snarl in his voice, but Reach did not resent it.

"I thought—" he began hesitantly.

"Thought you picked it up like sand or pebbles," Martyn scoffed. "Boyd, I guess you're the sucker in this outfit. It was your money. The rest of us are out only our time."

The engineer turned disgustingly toward the dory.

"Might as well go aboard and pull up the hook," he said. "Sooner we're back in Seattle the better off we'll be."

In silence they rowed out to the *Gray Goose*. Once aboard, Nell went to the forecabin and began to prepare the mid-day meal. The others followed, sat on the benches while she worked. Reach, the big, dominant seaman, the natural and arrogant leader, no longer existed. He sat staring at the table and Nell, from the stove, saw that he was not moody or even crushed, but rather the victim of childish wonder and perplexity. She smiled as she thought of how the ship's company had feared this man as a ruthless, scheming pirate.

CHAPTER VI

DESERTION

NELL, Howard, John Reach and Willie went ashore after they had eaten. Martyn had already gone to the engine room. He had flatly refused to do any more gold hunting.

"He'll be with us soon's we find the first trace of something," Reach said as he fastened the dory. "Now, lady, how we going at this?"

He was exuberant again but he did not

assume leadership. He faced Nell as if waiting orders.

"First, we must find where this man worked," she answered readily. "None of us knows a thing about prospecting."

"And if we find the sort of rock he worked in we'll know what to look for," Howard added.

"That's it. And it can't be far from his camp."

"Maybe he camped here because of water," Willie suggested.

Reach glanced helplessly at the hills rising behind them.

"It's like hunting a lost anchor out in the middle of the gulf of Alaska," he said.

"It isn't!" Nell retorted. "But we must go at this systematically. We'll split into two parties and divide the land. Each party will cover its territory thoroughly. We can't lose that way, if we don't give up after the first hour."

"Lady, you show us!" Reach exclaimed. "I'm no land skipper, but I ain't a quitter."

They were standing on the site of the prospector's camp. Nell had been carried along by enthusiasm and determination, by a refusal to admit defeat, and now that she had the thing put up to her, her gallant spirit was only challenged.

"All right," she said. "But it's simple. He camped on this creek. The chances are equal that he worked on either side, or both. Howard and I will take the right, you two the left. And listen!" she warned as Reach and Willie turned toward the hills. "Don't just wander around. Mark off a strip for this afternoon and cover it. Tomorrow we'll mark off some more."

"You bet, lady!" Reach bellowed. "It's like fishing halibut. Find the grounds and then lay out your gear so you fish it all. Now, look here, Willie. See that peaked rock up the creek and about two points west? Today we'll . . ."

Nell and Howard left them, going up the creek bed. There was no longer any restraint between these two. It was not only that there was a new deal all around, a shifting of dominance and of interests. Nell had regretted her attitude when Reach drove the young man to assist her with the dishes. She admitted to herself she had been catty and she wished to atone.

"We're going to find it!" she exclaimed gaily as they struggled over boulders and through thick brush. "We can't lose."

"Not with you to drive us," Howard laughed. "I never imagined you—well, things are different in a city. You were game enough, even to start on such a trip, but——"

"It's a strange thing about John Reach," Nell interrupted quickly. "He drove us without mercy in Seattle, assumed authority, did as he pleased. But this morning——"

"Out of his element," Howard explained when she paused. "When we left the locks, were at sea—I don't know. Guess the real me came out. I'd never been up against that sort of thing, never thought much about it. I wish you'd believe I was as disgusted as you were."

It was Nell's first thought to laugh it off and turn the subject but she saw that he was in distress and had spoken with an effort.

"I'm glad you said that!" she exclaimed warmly. "It gives me a chance to tell you I talked like a snippy little brat, and that I'm sorry. Now let's forget it."

She thrust forth a hand impulsively and her reward came in the way Howard's face lighted when he took it.

"Thanks," he whispered hoarsely, and then turned to lead the way inland.

The search was kept up until long after suppertime, and even then Reach and Willie were the last to return to the beach.

"Not a sign, lady," the big man reported. "But that don't bother us none. We'll get it."

Despite the tragic disappointment of the morning, there had never been a moment since the *Gray Goose* left Seattle when spirits were higher or there was such a warmth of feeling as that night in the forecabin. Martyn had prepared his own meal and retired to the after cabin and the four were gathered for the first time without doubts, suspicions and fear raising barriers between them.

THE next morning they were at it early, the three men doing the breakfast dishes while Nell packed lunches for them. Martyn caused a slight delay when he asked for help in getting the second dory overboard.

"Might want to get ashore myself and pick up a few pounds of gold," he explained, but he went back to the engine

room, where they could hear him working as they rowed away.

The land was desolate. They had learned that. Not a tree was to be seen. Ridges rose higher and higher back from the sea. Brush grew in the hollows, moss along the sides. Even in the sunshine that first day the dreariness of the island was in itself a barrier against which they had to thrust. The second day there was no sun, and a chill wind blew from the west.

Nell was still borne along by the courage and decision which had so spurred the men and she waved a cheerful good-by to Reach and Willie when the two parties separated. She and Howard went farther up the creek, past the area they had searched the previous afternoon, and then worked eastward. All forenoon they blocked off strips, crossed them again and again, then laid out new limits.

"We can't fail if we keep this up," Howard said as they ate their lunch at noon.

"It's not right, though, for us to work like this while Martyn stays aboard," Nell declared.

"He'll come around. Trouble with him is, he was so confident Reach and Willie were pirates or rum runners or something of that sort, he's disappointed when he finds they are on the square."

"Whatever it is, he's a short sport," the girl insisted. "I'm glad he's getting only a half share. It's all he deserves. Now what will we do this afternoon? Go back to the creek and work on inland?"

"If we go farther east and work toward the sea, we'll be back there by night," Howard suggested.

Both had become somewhat accustomed to the country and were separating more and more. They would select a hill some distance away, divide the land between and agree to meet on the hill. It was hard work, especially for Nell, but the quest drove them on, sent them scrambling up ridges, tumbling into ravines.

In mid-afternoon they selected a low ridge half a mile to the east and separated. Nell failed to see the fog bank sweeping in from the west. She was in a steep walled valley when the thick, white moss flowed over her. For a moment she gave it little heed but when she started to climb the ridge to the east she suddenly dis-

covered that she could not see a hundred feet ahead.

In panic, she climbed rapidly, as if expecting safety at the crest, but when she reached it, panting, her hands torn by sharp rocks, she stopped in terror.

On all sides the ridge faded into the white fog. No island of a hilltop appeared anywhere. Above, below, in every direction, the blanket of mist blotted out the land.

Nell called. Howard, she knew, had been inland from her, was to meet her farther to the east. He could not be more than a quarter of a mile away, though it was an hour since they had separated.

But there was no answer. She called until her throat hurt, until she could only croak, and then she sat down on the ground, hopeless, suddenly very much afraid.

For a time she tried to pierce the fog by searching for another ridge, for a recognizable hill, but she only strained her eyes trying to focus on something that did not exist. She ceased trying when queer shapes began to appear, shapes of things whose unreality told her of the tricks hopeful vision was playing.

Nell had heard Reach and Willie speak of the North Pacific fogs, of how they sometimes held on for days. She was becoming chilled. There was no fuel on the ridge. Suddenly she saw that she might perish there if she did not do something.

When she sprang to her feet she did not plunge heedlessly into the fog. She turned her mind to every step she had taken since leaving Howard, to the slopes of the ridge, the trend of the valleys. She remembered how she had climbed the ridge, in what direction she had intended to go. When at last she started it was with a clear idea of her course.

This was quickly shattered. At the end of the ridge she faced a sea of fog. She could plunge down the side but there was no visible objective. She must depend upon her sense of direction, and she had never known if she had one.

Yet she started resolutely down the ridge. The descent was only a hundred yards, and at the bottom she encountered another ridge directly before her. She climbed this, found herself again looking into nothing, and with less certainty as to the direction in which the beach lay.

Nevertheless she started downward. The slope was very steep. She came to a great, flat rock that fell away into the depths of the fog. For a moment she hesitated. She might slip, and the bottom——

Nell's feet went out from under her and she whirled downward.

HER body gained considerable momentum before her feet struck the moss. It rolled off in a great sheet, crumpled beneath her in thick folds. One big piece wrapped itself about her body. When she struck bottom she was more conscious of suffocation than of shock.

But the girl forgot the good offices of the moss as she looked back up the slope down which she had come. She continued to look at it, open mouthed, speechless, for even to her inexperienced eyes it was evident that in her descent she had swept the moss covering from a wide vein of quartz.

It glistened even in the fog, and as she bent nearer she saw fine traceries of gold, just as in the piece of rock John Reach had carried for so many years.

The girl yelled, in exultation, in a frantic effort to bring Howard Boyd to the spot. She yelled again and again until, in that deep cleft in the hills, the reechoing sound told how fog and rock walls buried her voice.

Once more she examined the vein of quartz. She was too ignorant of mining even to guess its depth or extent, or to judge remotely its value. She only knew she had succeeded, that she had found the treasure for which they had come to the Aleutians.

Wild with excitement, impatient to communicate with the others, Nell turned away, only to encounter the fog filled cañon and to realize that, at any cost, she must not only reach the beach but she must also be able to retrace her steps to the vein. After a moment of consideration she turned to the right, down the slope, and almost immediately she stepped into a small stream flowing between great boulders.

Common sense told Nell the creek led to the sea. The wonder was that, in her ignorance and excitement, she could employ that quality which is so rare despite its ordinary name.

The creek served merely as a guide, how-

ever. Willow and alder matted the ground on either side. In wider parts of the draw it spread to the hillsides, offering a barrier which made progress dismayingly slow. Direction became a matter of no importance, time a conundrum, distance a delusion. Gasping, frantic with desire to tell the others of her discovery, Nell struggled on through brush and fog, over rocks and down steep walled gorges.

It was in one of these tiny cañons that she found the dam. The creek became a small pond. She walked around it to discover that a rock slide had choked the stream, but even as she scrambled over the obstruction she considered it only a natural barrier. To the city girl, the broken rock, the absence of deep moss and the fresh and jagged nature of the fragments meant nothing. But she stopped when she reached the bottom and saw the shoes.

At first she believed they had been dropped and it was only because they indicated someone had been there that her interest was aroused. But when she went closer and noted their peculiar position, toes upward, soles toward her, she halted. Once, when on an excursion with some friends, she had found a man sleeping in the woods, and his feet had looked exactly like this.

But there was no man behind the shoes, only the pile of loose, jagged rock. The fog was thick, gray and ghostly. It was cold, too, and Nell shivered uncontrollably. She wanted to flee on down the creek bed to the sea but the thought of what she must tell the men, of how she had run from a pair of hobnailed shoes, restrained her. Resolutely she walked forward, and it was then that she saw the two slender bleached bones protruding from each of the laced tops, the other ends covered by the pile of broken rock.

There were other things, a rusty shovel, a roughly built box with strips nailed across the bottom, a little pile of rock crushed almost to powder, but Nell was only vaguely aware of them. She turned quickly and went on down the creek.

The girl reached the sea only a little way beyond and turned at once to the right. The fog was so thick she could not see fifty feet out onto the water, and the hills had disappeared behind her. She walked rapidly along the hard sand with a grateful sense of freedom and security.

Before long she would find the dory and perhaps the three men.

But after walking rapidly for some time Nell came to the end of the beach. She stopped in amazement when a wall of rock barred her way, for she remembered having seen it, far to the west of the prospector's camp and the *Gray Goose*. These she could have passed in the fog, but not the dory.

She went back, calling now. Her voice was echoed from the hills. Dread came to her in the stillness that followed. The occasional shrill cry of a gull and the distant booming of the surf only added to the sense of loneliness.

She found the prospector's camp, found the drift log to which the dory had been fastened, but there was no rope or boat. The *Gray Goose*, she knew, lay little more than two hundred yards away, and she called again and again. There was no answer, and no sound came from the water.

Nell was not worried, except for Howard Boyd. He had been still farther inland when the fog came, undoubtedly was hunting for her still, and he might get lost back there among the hills. Reach and Willie, she understood, may have taken the dory to go farther west along the shore, and if Martyn were working in the engine room he could not hear her call. Occasionally she shouted, on the chance he might come on deck. Then he could blow the whistle and call Howard back to the beach.

An hour passed, and another. The stillness was broken only by the cries of sea birds. The fog had come late in the afternoon and Nell, reviewing all that had happened since, knew it must now be past nine o'clock. She was very hungry and very cold, and the gray mist was becoming blacker. In a little while darkness would come.

THE girl strode up and down the beach in an effort to keep warm. She called often now, and she was no longer unafraid. The absence of all four men, and of sound on the *Gray Goose*, which lay so maddeningly almost within reach, did not fit in with any explanation she could devise.

And then to the west, close to the beach, she heard the sound of oars. The quick snap of the oarlocks told of speed, even of excitement. She called, heard Willie's

shrill answer, and a moment later a dory shot out of the fog and grounded at her feet.

"Where has everyone—?" Nell began, but Reach had leaped ashore and was dancing on the sand.

"We've got it!" he shouted as he stopped before her. "A gold mine! The best kind. It's what Willie and I know, and can do, and it's a fortune for the crew of us."

"You mean where the prospector worked?" Nell broke in, her voice falling flat as she realized that hers had not been the discovery alone.

"Prospector nothing!" Reach roared. "It's real money we'll get, real and easy. A hundred, two hundred thousand! Maybe more! It's a ship we've found, lady! A ship! Deserted, grounded in the next bay! Just lying there waiting for us to come along and salvage her."

"Quit talking so we can get aboard the *Gray Goose*," Willie cut in sharply. "We waste time and we'll get nothing."

Reach pushed Nell toward the dory and grasped the bow to shove off.

"Wait!" the girl cried. "I've called and called and no one has answered."

"Where's the engineer and Boyd?" Willie demanded.

"I don't know. I've been here for hours and——"

Willie leaped out of the dory and started along the beach. He walked swiftly, bent far over. His figure was almost lost in the fog when they heard him call.

"The engineer's come ashore," he said when he had started back. "I saw where he pulled up the other dory."

"Now what—?" Reach began, but Willie cut him short.

"Miss," he commanded, "you stay here on the beach and answer when we call, so as to guide us back. John, you and me'll go look."

They tumbled into the dory and in a moment the small craft had been swallowed up in the fog.

Willie's voice floated back soon afterward. Nell answered. For half an hour this continued. Darkness came and the girl, by the old man's call, knew the dory was being rowed back and forth in the bay, crossing again and again the spot where the *Gray Goose* had been at anchor.

The boat returned. Reach did not get

up from his seat. Willie sat silently in the stern.

"What—?" Nell began.

"Lady, somebody's a crook," Reach said in a voice hushed by amazement.

"It's the engineer!" Willie shrilled. "Only have to look at him to know it. He and the ranch hand have dug out, marooned us here. Ever hear of a dirtier trick?"

"I'd never 'a' thought it of Howard," Reach said. "He was lubberish enough but——"

"He couldn't have done it!" Nell broke in fiercely. "He wouldn't! Besides, he was back there in the hills with me. He's lost in the fog and——"

She broke off, suddenly realizing that the words had not rung true.

"Hop in here, miss," Willie said in a gentle tone. "We'd better be getting over to the ship, where we can eat and be warm."

CHAPTER VII

SALVAGE

NELL GRAY did not forget entirely that great vein of quartz she had uncovered when sliding down the steep slope, nor the shoes at the foot of the pile of rock. They had made too deep an impression. But neither a gold mine nor even the fabulous sum promised by John Reach's claims of salvage could make her forget the desertion of Howard Boyd.

It surprised Nell to find that she was so numbed by the fact. She recalled her contempt for him when he had so readily succumbed to Reach's dominance after leaving Seattle, and wondered if, after all, first impressions were the most reliable. Even then, she knew, her first impressions in those days of preparation for the voyage had been favorable.

"We'd 'a' starved if we hadn't found this ship," Willie broke in upon her thoughts. "That's the dirtiest trick there is, marooning a man on an island."

Nell did not comment. It had been her belief, until the two men had gone in search of the *Gray Goose*, that Howard was lost in the hills. But when she remained on the beach, answering their signals, she had walked back and forth a little way to keep warm. And it was

then, as she passed the spot where Martyn had come ashore in the second dory, that she had seen the tracks of Howard's feet in the wet sand. They led to the sharp impression of the boat and, though she had searched, Nell found no trace of their leading away. He had walked down, stepped into the boat and gone out to the *Gray Goose*.

Nell knew she could not be mistaken. He had bought those shoes, high, laced and heavily hobnailed, in Seattle, had shown them to her. And that day, when they ate lunch, she had seen them, new, with clear cut soles and heels. There could be no mistake.

"What beats me is why they left," Reach said in a puzzled tone.

"To get the boat, of course," Willie snapped. "Chances were good no one would pick us up before we starved."

"But Howard—I'd never 'a' thought it of him!"

"Better think about rowing," Willie commented sharply. "It's getting so dark I can't see much past the bow. Pull on that starboard oar and keep closer to the beach."

The darkness was intense now. Nell wondered how they could hope to find a ship, even though it were ablaze with lights, in that dense fog, but they did not seem to worry. Willie, in the bow, sounded repeatedly with an oar and gave directions. Occasionally he discussed their whereabouts with Reach, and Nell saw that he had fixed each bit of shoreline in his mind, that in returning it was as though he were reeling up a knotted string, reading it by touch and apparently with complete confidence.

But their progress was necessarily slow. Nell sat in the stern and shivered from the cold. She had little interest in what they were doing, none in the ship they were seeking in that dense blackness. Once Reach burst out with exultant prophecies of the fortune they would make, but it aroused no response.

Two hours were consumed in that creeping voyage along the beach, but at last Reach ceased rowing.

"Better put the lady ashore?" he asked.

"You can keep a course for that distance without her yelling at you," Willie retorted. "Head straight out now. That's it."

Reach settled himself to a steady stroke. Nell did not understand what it all meant, and she was too cold to care.

"Easy," Willie cautioned, but too late. The dory struck head-on. From the stern Nell could see nothing. Even when she knew they were working along the straight side of a ship she could not make out its dark mass above her.

At last Willie found what he wanted, a dangling rope. He made the dory fast to it and disappeared upward in the darkness. Reach prepared to follow.

"We'll drop a sling," he said. "Slip it under your arms."

Nell had never known darkness could be so complete. She went swinging up the rusty steel sides of the ship, felt hands reaching for her, was lowered to a solid deck. Even then she could not see her companions but Reach took her by the hand and led her away.

LESS than an hour later they were eating supper in the galley, sitting near a warm coal fire. A lantern shed yellow rays on the table.

The men finished first and filled their pipes. They were across the table from Nell, half lost in the shadows, and she started as she saw their faces.

John Reach was no longer the helpless sailor balked by strange surroundings. His bushy red hair and flaming beard reflected the dim rays and his blue eyes seemed to provide their own light. Never had Nell seen him look more like a ruthless buccaneer.

Beside him sat Willie, more sinister than ever in the gloom, the long scar gleaming athwart his face, his one eye glaring with a new ferocity. Nell recalled Martyn's statement the day they left Seattle:

"He's got notches in his knife."

"We'll just forget everything that's happened and start fresh," Reach announced in his quarter-deck voice. "We got a job here, the three of us."

"And if we do it!" Willie's eye was turned fiercely on Nell. "If we do it, we'll never have to work again."

The girl did not comment. She was an event or two behind in her adjustments. Folly, blind determination, success quickly followed by desertion and the disappearance of the *Gray Goose*, the return of Reach and Willie with a story that seemed

preposterous, the long, cold row to the stranded ship. . . .

Even the ship was not real. She had not seen it. Her feet had trod decks as solid as a pavement. The big, dark compartment in which she sat seemed more like the basement of a skyscraper, while the two piratical looking men across the table only added to an impression of unreality. Pervading all was a sense of loss, of bitter disappointment. Even Willie's talk of a fortune could not touch her.

"It's going to be a lot harder, not having more hands," Reach said. "But we'll do it somehow. We got to!"

Nell started. He was the vigorous, unswayable figure she had first encountered in Salmon Bay. The sea and a ship had reinvested him.

"Them two rats—" Willie began, but he seemed to find speech inadequate.

"Are you sure they're gone with the *Gray Goose*?" Nell asked. "In that fog?"

"No chance!" Reach scoffed. "We rowed all over the bay. But I don't understand their game. Wasn't Howard with you?"

It was not the question so much as Reach's casual manner of asking it that aroused Nell. The man seemed to have put the past completely behind him, was barely interested in what had happened, and his attitude was a challenge.

"He was with me until about half an hour before the fog came," she answered, and plunged into her story.

Even as she told it she saw that she was not holding them. She described the afternoon in detail, the slide down the smooth rock, the uncovering of the vein of quartz, the finding of the prospector's operations and his body.

"That would be the fellow I saw years ago," Reach commented. "Red tumbled down and buried him probably, and some Aleuts came along and took his outfit. And Howard, he saw the fog coming and dug out for the beach."

"Fog was what they was waiting for," Willie added. "It was the first we've had since we anchored. Mind the engineer having you point out on the chart where we were, John? He knows enough about these waters to see we'd starve before we were picked up, and we couldn't get out in the dory without grub and something to carry water in."

Reach nodded agreement.

"Howard and the engineer was pretty thick all the way up from Seattle," he said. "I'd never 'a' thought it of Howard. But we'll row down there tomorrow, if the fog thips, just on the long chance."

Nell understood that the last was a concession to her but she ignored it.

"You two don't seem to care anything about my finding gold!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Gold!" Reach bellowed. "Lady, we've got gold here—more'n we could ever dig out of the ground."

"But I don't understand. And how did you happen to find the ship?"

"We hunted for a mine, all right," the big man answered. "Laid out a course and followed it, just like you said. Willie was climbing a hill when he saw her masts. We talked it over. She looked like she was on the beach, and there was no smoke. So we rowed over this way."

"But it isn't wrecked!" the girl exclaimed. "Isn't there someone aboard?"

THE effect of her question was startling, and puzzling, to Nell. She had found them jubilant because of the chance for big salvage money. Now they were only passionately indignant because seamen had abandoned a vessel. Willie's one eye glared with new ferocity and his voice was a shrill squeak. Reach's red hair and beard glistened in the lantern light and he beat the table with a heavy fist.

Their comments and sketchy descriptions would have been sufficiently revealing to anyone familiar with the sea, but to Nell they meant little. She understood only that the ship, the *Xenia*, a freighter of 3,500 net tonnage, hailing from San Francisco, carrying a general cargo from Japan to Seattle, had evidently met heavy weather, had one hold full of water and, according to Reach and Willie, had been abandoned at sea.

Nell, remembering her uncle's stories, at once sensed mystery, a mutiny, an epidemic of some dreadful disease, but the men scoffed at her suggestions.

"There's nothing queer about this, lady," John Reach snorted. "Insurance has put more'n one ship ashore and there's skippers without nerve. I only know it's so, though I don't understand it. A ship

—to wreck her, to abandon her at sea when she's still well afloat——"

He broke off, unable to express himself. Willie nodded fierce agreement.

"And a fine ship like this!" he said. "But what can you expect with the men that go to sea nowadays? I've watched 'em climb aboard, with white collars on, and suitcases with toothbrushes in 'em, and their hair slicked down. Power's done it. You can't have men when you have power."

"It's power we'll be needin'," Reach interrupted. "We'll never move her without it, and now the *Gray Goose* is gone, and the engineer, we got our work cut out for us, Willie, you and me——" He paused and glanced at Nell. "And her."

Nell started. There had been so much unreality her mind had passed over any share she might have in salvaging the *Xenia*. Even that task had seemed to her preposterous. Two men and a girl! She knew the big crews such ships carried.

Yet Reach and Willie sat there calmly discussing the undertaking. They spoke of fabulous rewards, but their indignation over the abandonment of the ship and their eager, confident planning revealed their true attitude.

Suddenly the girl saw the situation in its correct perspective. In Seattle she and Howard Boyd had laughed at the absurdity of going to the Aleutians to search for gold under the leadership of a stranger, a domineering buccaneer. Yet they had gone, the man had not been a buccaneer, and that day she had found gold.

Nell knew that it was adventure, not gold, that had decided her then, that distant seas and strange lands had drawn her more than the thought of yellow metal, and now she was suddenly overwhelmed by a realization of the romantic possibilities of the present situation.

A great ship stranded in a little-known corner of the world! Two men and a girl battling against great odds to save what criminal or cowardly seamen had abandoned! It was an experience encountered in few lifetimes, an opportunity that now held her enthralled.

"The three of us!" she cried exultantly. "We'll do it!"

An answering spirit flamed out to embrace hers. She felt it, saw it gleam in the little man's savage eye, in the dominant glance of the other.

"I'd rather have somebody who talks like that than half a dozen engineers like we lost," Willie cackled.

"Sure!" Reach agreed. "Look what she did yesterday. And today! Found that gold mine all by herself."

"But the ship!" Nell insisted. "Is it really wrecked—badly?"

"It is and it isn't," Willie answered.

"Luckiest thing I ever heard of," John Reach interrupted. "She's in a landlocked bay, safe from any gale. The entrance where she came in ain't more'n a hundred yards wide. How she got in without piling up, nobody'll ever know. Hundreds of miles of rock shore, and she found that one hole."

"The bow's resting on sand bottom," Willie added. "Safe as if she was in dry dock and leaking in only one hold."

"We'll pump that out," Reach announced confidently. "And we can run her out o' here. Say!"

He struck the table with a big fist and looked at the others with the flaming enthusiasm of a boy.

"And when we get her out we'll keep right on going, right into Seattle Harbor!"

"Sure!" Willie agreed fiercely. "Might as well take her there as any place. Slow, but we can make it."

Nell gasped. She had thought of their task as the more simple one of keeping the ship afloat until someone came for it, had never dreamed this strange pair intended to take it out of a snug harbor. It was unbelievable, more absurd than anything of which she had ever heard.

But drama! What if they did do this mad thing? They seemed very sure, and the sea was their home. The girl's heart leaped at the thought of it. She had wanted adventure and romance. What could exceed this?

"Can we?" she asked breathlessly.

"Sure we can!" Reach laughed. "Oil burner, you know. It's going to be work, and we won't get much sleep, once we're started, but it's been done before."

"We got to get the water out o' the engine room first," Willie said as he leaned across the table. "There'll be some sort o' jury pump we can rig and . . ."

Nell listened in ecstasy. Most of it was incomprehensible, but she did not care. The pure drama of the thing had seized her imagination. The black shadows

beyond the table ceased to be disturbing. Reach and Willie were no longer piratical seamen but her comrades in endeavor. It was warm and cozy there beneath the lantern. The stillness of the great ship served as a shield for the jubilant atmosphere that pervaded the galley.

Willie put an end to the delight of that experience with the curt remark that they had better get some sleep while they could, and Nell was led up flights of steps, amid the dense, swirling fog, to the captain's room. It startled her, the comfort, the spaciousness and the attractive furnishings as revealed by the dim light of the lantern.

"Sorry the electric lights and the elevator ain't running," John Reach laughed. "Steam heat's off, too, but we'll have 'em all before long. And cram the sleep into your hatches, lady, because we'll be up early."

NELL wakened to find bright sunlight flooding the room. She lay there a moment, admiring her surroundings, until a clearing consciousness told her someone had rapped on the door. She dressed quickly and went outside.

The height of the superstructure above the water startled the girl, as did the size of the *Xenia*, and when she remembered how the *Gray Goose* had survived two gales in the Gulf of Alaska she marveled that men would think such a vessel unsafe and abandon it for small boats.

Nell went forward but found the steps gone. The starboard wing of the bridge had been wrenched away, and there was twisted steel on the well deck forward. It was most evident the *Xenia* had struck heavy weather. She turned to the port side and discovered a way to the main deck, where Willie waited to lead her to the galley.

"We're busy," he said shortly. "You rustle a meal."

The men were back in half an hour, both talking at once of things of which Nell knew nothing. Only when they began to eat, were they silent, and after they had finished they hurried away without lighting their pipes.

Nell washed the dishes and then began a curious examination of galley and storerooms. There were supplies in abundance and great variety. At first she only marveled at the equipment, but as she opened doors and peered into the refrigerators she

became aware of recent occupancy. Food, cooked or ready for use, was barely touched by mold. There was no odor of decay. Quarters of beef were still frozen in the cold storage room. From her brief experience in the *Gray Goose's* galley, she judged the ship had been abandoned only a few days.

Her investigations carried her into many rooms. In one she found shelves filled with men's clothing and spent a delighted ten minutes selecting a flannel shirt, overalls and jumper that would fit her.

Clad in her new blue uniform, she went on deck in search of her companions, but they were far below and no sound led her to them. She ascended to the captain's stateroom to examine her quarters more thoroughly, and from there to the chart room immediately forward.

Nell knew nothing of log books and their legal importance, but a search revealed there were no records. She did see that the clock was running. A key hung beside it and when she wound the springs she found they were quite tight.

From the undamaged wing of the bridge, Nell surveyed the bay into which the *Xenia* had drifted. The sun was warm, there was a blue sky and a gentle westerly breeze. To the south she heard surf, and in a low place on the shore, she guessed, was the entrance. The bay was about half a mile across, and the ship had struck bow-on, close to a long sand beach.

To the east Nell could see the shore they had followed in the darkness, but hills cut off any view of the bay where the *Gray Goose* had anchored.

The land, bare and rocky, was as desolate as ever. Only the sea seemed friendly that bright morning. The water was as blue as the sky. Nell shivered as she remembered the shoes at the bottom of the rock pile, the toll gold had taken, and she was thankful that their interests were again directed seaward. She wanted to forget the island and all that had happened there. With swift determination, almost with eagerness, she turned to go below and find Reach and Willie.

As Nell passed through the chart room the clock struck. The sound startled her, and when she paused to glance backward a movement on the beach held her eyes. Two men were approaching on shore, from the westward.

CHAPTER VIII

BUBONIC!

CAPTAIN Mark Slade and Chief Engineer Ned Flynn of the *Xenia* trudged slowly and in silence along the beach. For three days they had not eaten. At night they had slept on the ground, without fire or blankets. Neither was accustomed to walking. Their feet were sore and their muscles stiff.

They plodded doggedly through sand and over boulders. Sometimes their shoes slipped on wet kelp and they cursed as they nearly fell.

To their right a narrow channel led to the open sea.

"A man couldn't 'a' taken her through there!" Flynn exclaimed when he saw the constricted passage.

There was wonder and disgust in his tone, but Captain Slade did not comment.

They stopped at last. The bow of the *Xenia* was directly before them and only two hundred feet away. They stared at it for a time.

"Port lifeboat falls are hanging in the water," Flynn remarked.

"Don't do me any good," Slade retorted sullenly. "I can't swim."

Flynn looked down the beach.

"Got to eat," he said. "I can't swim either. Not that far. We could roll this log in."

Near by was a large cedar stick that had found a resting place after thousands of miles of drifting. Flynn found two small pieces of wood and handed one to the captain.

They worked for half an hour, shoveling out sand, digging holes for the insertion of their pries, tugging away, cursing when the log refused to move. But they got it in at last, then waded out and climbed astride it. Using their pries as paddles, they began an awkward progress toward the ship.

They reached it at last, worked along the port side until Flynn could grasp the davit falls. But as his hand closed over the rope it was suddenly agitated. Startled, Flynn glanced upward.

"Get aboard," Slade commanded. "My feet are freezing in this water."

"What you want?" a hoarse voice belled above them, and they looked up to see a face framed in vivid red hair.

Slade was so startled he lost his balance and slid off the log. He struggled back, with Flynn's help, and sat there shivering.

"What you want?" John Reach repeated, and this time there was a touch of mirth in his tone.

"What you doing aboard this ship?" Captain Slade countered furiously.

"Looking at you," Reach answered.

"How long you been aboard?"

"Two weeks."

"Two nothing! She wasn't—"

Reach's laugh roared out.

"Got you there, Captain!" he shouted. "I suppose your mate's the chief engineer."

There was unmistakably an inference in the last. Nell, who was watching the men beneath her, did not understand it, but she saw the one who wore gold braid on the sleeves of his blue coat suddenly devote his attention to clinging to the log.

"It would take the two of 'em, working together, to do it," came in Willie's shrill voice.

Slade cursed and then glanced up.

"Well, I'm sorry for you," he called.

"It takes 'em fast, it does."

"So?" Reach asked with frank interest.

"There were only five of us left when we took to the boats, the chief here, two oilers, a sailor and myself. The sailor passed out the first day and the oilers were so weak they couldn't help themselves when the surf overturned the lifeboat."

"Weak from hunger, you mean?" Reach asked innocently.

"No, you fool! The plague! Bubonic! Must have got it in Hongkong, our last port. The men dropped like flies. In the end those that were left didn't have the strength to do more than slip 'em over-side."

"Bubonic plague!" Nell cried. "On this ship!"

She drew back and glanced about the decks in horror. Willie, too, was startled, but Reach still leaned over the rail, his chin resting on his folded arms.

"Bubonic, eh?" he asked. "She's bad. I've run into it twice now. Last voyage from China it took half our crew. But we was lucky. There was a doctor on board, friend of the owner taking a voyage for his health, and he had some patent cure of his own. The three of us here was down with it, and we'd 'a' checked in with the rest if it hadn't been for that doc.

Lucky, ain't it? Once you've had the plague, you know, it can't touch you again."

Reach leaned comfortably on the rail, staring downward. The man below, wet, clinging to the unstable log, forced to bend far back to look up when he talked, was at a tremendous disadvantage. He was without the dignity and the power to which he had long been accustomed, and nothing he said seemed to make any impression.

"How many of you are there?" he demanded.

"Enough."

"You can be jailed for life, the lot of you, as pirates. And I'll see that you are."

"I suppose you two are hungry," Reach suggested amiably and irrelevantly. "Now I'll tell you what. Paddle yourselves back to shore and go back the way you came for a ways. We'll set some grub and blankets and a tarp on the beach." He had spoken softly but now his voice became harsh. "And that's all you get."

"Look here!" the captain protested. "Perhaps you don't know the law or understand your position, or mine. I'm master of this vessel and it's my duty to—"

"Don't talk to me about your duty!" Reach roared. "You abandoned this ship on the high seas, hoping she'd sink. Your friend there is probably the one who opened the sea cocks. Your crew is God knows where. You get ashore in a small boat and have the surprise of your life when you find the *Xenia* here."

"We had to abandon her," Slade interrupted.

"That's as good a lie as the plague. When you abandon a ship for good reason, you don't strip her of log, chart and papers. An honest sailor is never afraid to have anyone see his log. You're the pirate, the wrecker, and you don't have another chance to finish the job. Now get ashore and do as I say or you starve. I've wasted enough time with you."

REACH pulled viciously at the falls, jerking the block out of the engineer's hands. There was nothing left for the two on the log but to paddle ashore, which they did after the captain had thoroughly abused the red head that hung above him.

"Are you sure you're right about them?" Nell whispered.

"Right!" Reach roared. "Would they have come here with lies if they weren't wrong? I don't know their game or what they intended, but I'm sure it's crooked."

"You need only look at that pair," Willie added scornfully. "They abandoned her once for no good purpose. Now they'll want to claim credit for saving her."

"And if a man will wreck a vessel so the owners can get insurance, he's the sort that would turn around and play the other game."

"Once they step aboard, there's no salvage for us."

"You sure o' that, Willie?"

"I'm no lawyer, and not even a lawyer can get salvage straight. But I do know a crew can't collect it while outsiders can. For us, in a case like this, it's a third of the value of ship and cargo."

"And we'd earn it," Reach growled as he glanced over the ship. "But look here, Willie. We got to sleep sometime, and with them on shore so close——"

"That's an island," the old man said.

He pointed to the south shore of the bay, where a long, narrow strip of land separated the harbor from the open ocean. Reach's eyes lighted.

"They'll not bother us out here," he chuckled. "And after we get out, the Coast Guard will be glad to pick 'em up. Keep an eye on them, lady, while Willie and I break out some stores."

Two hours were required for the transfer. The dory, which Willie had hidden beneath the stern upon the approach of Slade and Flynn, was loaded with supplies. Then the engineer was ordered down the beach while the captain was rowed across alone.

"Not that I'm afraid of 'em together," Reach told Willie as they rowed back for Flynn. "I'd like nothing better'n having a crack at the scum, but we've enough chance aboard without takin' more."

When they returned, Reach told Nell there was no sign of the *Gray Goose* in the bay to the east.

"There's an open passage through," he reported. "We could see it all."

He seemed embarrassed and eager to get to work.

"Listen!" Nell said sharply. "Last night—in the sand—where the other dory was drawn up—you saw Howard's tracks?"

"I didn't, but Willie told me," the big

man replied uneasily. "That's why we didn't go hunting for him."

"Then that's behind us!" the girl exclaimed with sudden resolution. "There's nothing for us to do now but get to work."

"That's it," the big man answered in quick relief.

To Nell, in the days that followed, it was only a mad thing they were attempting to do. It was absurd to believe two men could move that great ship from its secure bed in the sand. It was folly to consider the three of them taking it across the North Pacific to Seattle.

Yet that was all John Reach and Willie talked of in the scant time they devoted to meals and to a brief pipe before turning in. While they worked they discussed details and means, argued technical points. Nell listened attentively but could make little of it. Once she asked questions, only to be smothered by terms and expressions that meant nothing.

Two things she did learn. The experiences of these men had been marvelously varied. Willie had spent fifty of his sixty-five years at sea, John Reach nearly forty. They had sailed in everything from small sealing schooners to big trans-Pacific freighters, from tiny gas boats to ocean-going tugs. Times of stress or emergency had sent them to stokeholds and engine rooms. Willie held a master's ticket, though he had never commanded anything larger than a halibut schooner.

All this came out in their discussions and plannings, and often Nell sat enthralled as one of the men, in bolstering a contention, related, with maddening lack of detail, a story of sheer romance.

The second thing she learned was that the engine room must be cleared of the little water in it, that fires must be built, the pumps operated and the flooded hold emptied. After that, with a favorable tide, the *Xenia* must be drawn off into deep water under her own power.

The object was simple, Nell understood, but the means an ununderstandable maze of details. She gathered that there were innumerable obstacles and contingencies, some of which could not be foreseen.

"I'd like to have those two fellows on the island over here," Reach growled one night. "I'd wring their necks if they didn't tell me all they did."

Nell had already gathered that they were

finding inexplicable things down there in the depths of the ship.

"Someone double-crossed 'em," Willie declared.

"That's certain," Reach agreed. "An assistant engineer, maybe an oiler, got hep and closed the sea cocks after the engineer opened 'em. That's why the ship didn't sink like they expected it would. Them two must 'a' got a jolt when they come along the beach and saw her."

They pumped out the engine room by hand, working eighteen hours without stopping except for meals. Nell added what strength she had until Willie saw blood from her hands on the pump handle and ordered her away.

The efforts of the two men were terrific and yet, Nell recognized, they labored with extreme caution. Everything was thoroughly tested and examined. They seemed most suspicious, were surprised when any piece of mechanism was found in working condition.

"As a job o' wreckin', it's the poorest I ever heard of," Reach declared. "I could 'a' done more damage in fifteen minutes."

"Is there a chance we are wrong, that they didn't try to sink the ship?" Nell asked.

"Log gone, chart for these waters, ship's papers—I don't understand their game. We turn her over tomorrow, see if she'll run."

She did. The big propeller churned futilely beneath the stern, but it turned, showing that, through it, the engine could drive the ship. They tried the steering gear. It, too, operated perfectly.

"How they ever got the crew off this ship when she was in such good shape, I can't understand," John Reach marveled.

"But it's been done, so why worry?" Willie snorted. "Let's start pumpin' out that hold."

NELL, alive now to the major obstacles, had been feverishly excited when the engine was started. But in the flooded hold forward lurked possibilities of a situation that might thwart any effort, and the suspense became almost unbearable.

"It's this way," Reach had explained it to her. "We wouldn't be afraid of that hold staying flooded if we had her off the beach. At least, we'd take a chance on

it. But it's got to be pumped out before we can get the ship into deep water."

"You mean the forward end must be lightened?"

"That's it. We've got only about three and a half feet range o' tide here, so that won't help much. But we've figured that, with the water out o' her, she can pull herself off on a good tide. She didn't hit hard, and she hit at low water."

"Then what is there to worry about?" Nell asked.

"Nothing!" Willie cackled derisively.

"He means he's sure a sea cock is open in that hold," Reach laughed. "Chances are there is. We would pump against that, get enough water out so we could find the cock and close it. But if there is a leak, a bad one, we couldn't pump as fast as the sea would run in."

"There's no leak," Willie insisted.

"Hope so. But the ship's been through some weather. Look at the bridge. That means a chance of a real leak, just what those two was waitin' for. If there is, we're stuck."

They had been toiling together for ten days with the one thought before them. Twice the men had worked for thirty-six hours at a stretch, and always Nell insisted on remaining with them.

"Those rats opened a sea cock!" Willie shouted. "Don't you worry, miss. We'll pump her out and we'll pull her free, and then the three of us could sail her around the world."

In that inclusive remark of the fierce little man whose one eye glared so fiendishly, Nell found reward for all her toil.

"It'll be fun!" she cried. "Sailing her right into Seattle harbor! In front of the whole city!"

"Just the three of us," John Reach agreed. "We'll do it."

A few hours after they had tried out the engine, Nell reported that there was no fire on the island across the bay. She had given herself the task of keeping a more or less casual watch on the two men marooned there. Generally they were in sight on the beach, and nearly always there was smoke.

"What if they do get off?" Reach scoffed. "They can't get aboard us, and tomorrow morning early we start pumping out the hold."

"I'd keep a watch just the same," Willie

warned. "A good piece of driftwood and——"

"The tarp they used for a tent is gone," Nell interrupted as she laid down the glasses.

"They've shifted their camp," Reach said. "But we needn't worry. We'll lift the dory on deck, see that there are no ropes dangling, and there's no way for 'em to get aboard."

His counsel prevailed. All three were very tired. Nell, in the captain's state-room, kept watch until dark, but weariness overcame her. When she wakened it was broad daylight and an unfamiliar sound smote her ears. She leaped to her feet, ran to the door and saw the *Gray Goose* entering the bay from the east.

CHAPTER IX

THE ATTACK

IT WAS only natural that emotion should hold complete sway over Nell Gray. The halibut schooner was her ship, and she had believed it lost. But most of all her spirits leaped with the thought that Howard Boyd was returning.

The *Gray Goose* was a quarter of a mile away and coming rapidly toward the *Xenia*. Nell watched from a window until it was within half that distance and then, feverishly excited, she began to dress. The schooner's foremast was close-by to starboard when she ran down the steps on the port side and on to the engine room.

"The *Gray Goose*!" she called down into the black depths. "She's back!"

"What's that?" came Willie's cackling voice.

"The *Gray Goose* is here! Hurry!"

She heard John Reach answer Willie's call, saw the old man springing up from the iron steps, and turned to run aft.

The *Gray Goose* was lying there now, close alongside. Nell saw her masts. She rushed on, excited, frantic with joy, but as she approached the rail above the schooner two hands reached up, caught a firm hold, and the next instant a man in a blue coat, with gold stripes on the sleeves, swung aboard.

Another followed. Nell recognized them as the captain and engineer of the *Xenia*. And behind them came Jefferson Martyn.

Stunned by surprise and fear, Nell stood

there a moment before she shrieked a warning. The three men were running toward her, each armed with a short club, and behind she could hear Willie approaching. She shrieked again, calling Reach's name. Martyn swerved, clapped a hand over her mouth and threw her heavily to the deck.

"Lie there!" he warned, and ran on.

Willie was no match for Slade and Flynn, and he had no weapon. They overthrew him by sheer weight, slipped a bit of line about his wrists and ran on, ordering Martyn to watch him.

Amidships, on the port side, they met John Reach. He had heard Nell's cry and was running aft. When he saw Slade and Flynn he ran the faster, charging barehanded against their clubs.

For a short time it was a glorious fight. Reach was heavy and active, and he was aflame with rage. His great head and beard of bristling red hair, his long, thick arms reaching forward, the roars that issued from his throat, all these had their effect on the two men of the *Xenia*. They hesitated.

Reach caught Captain Slade by an arm and threw him heavily against the rail, and without apparent loss of motion was upon the engineer. Flynn was bigger than the captain and had the fighting instinct. He gave ground, then darted in and plied his club so vigorously Reach was forced to fall back.

But Reach was wily. He exhibited fear and panic, glanced about as if for a way to retreat, then ducked swiftly in beneath the flying club and had the engineer about the waist. It was a bear hug, and he bent his adversary back with such crushing force it seemed that he would break the man in two.

Captain Slade, somewhat dazed by his collision with the rail, started forward uncertainly but it was Martyn who was the menace. He circled swiftly, his club ready. Nell screamed a warning but Reach was intent on his task of putting Flynn out of the fight. The club caught Reach on the back of the head, his grip loosened and he sagged to the floor.

Flynn staggered away, but Slade and Martyn threw themselves upon the unconscious man and began to bind his arms and legs.

It all happened so quickly Nell had not risen from the deck, where Martyn had

flung her. But now as she saw Reach and Willie helpless she realized for the first time what it all meant, and how precarious was her own position.

A low sound came to her ears and she turned to find Willie's one eye glaring at her. He jerked his head slightly as a signal for her to come nearer and she ran over and knelt beside him.

"Knife in my pocket," he whispered, and in a moment she had set him free.

The old man grasped the knife, leaped to his feet and darted across the deck in a gallant attack. The three had just risen from securing Reach's arms and legs, and as Willie flung himself into their midst, slashing viciously, they fled before him.

"Separate! Get your clubs!" Slade ordered. "Look out, Flynn!"

Willie was darting about, chasing one, then another. The fury of his onslaughts and the swiftness of his movements were astounding for one of his age. Flynn stared incredulously, and barely escaped a vicious stab.

"Get your clubs!" Slade repeated as he kicked one across the deck and ran after it.

Willie himself had picked up one and swept Flynn and Martyn before him. Nell had never seen anything so fiendish as that one eye, or the long lash of a scar so gleaming white athwart a face dark with fury. It thrilled her, the gallantry and the courage of the old sea hunter, but a moment later tears came to the girl's eyes and she blamed herself remorselessly for having set him free.

The tears partly hid what happened. She saw Flynn thrust out a foot and trip the old man, but not Slade's leap forward with upraised club.

"Not so bad as it might have been," Slade laughed as he stood over his victim. "Guess they won't give us any more trouble. Haul 'em forward and we'll dump 'em in the fo'c's'le."

HE REACHED down, grasped Willie by an ankle and started to drag the unconscious old man across the deck. The brutality of it aroused Nell as had nothing else. She did not scream, she did not speak, but she flung herself upon the captain, scratching at his face and striking furiously at his chest. Startled, he released Willie's foot and drew back.

Nell dropped to her knees and lifted Willie's head. She shook it gently but the one eye did not open.

"We'd better put her in with 'em," Flynn chuckled. "She's spoiled your beauty, skipper."

"I'll spoil hers!" Slade retorted savagely. "Get onto your feet there and no more nonsense."

"You wrecker!" Nell cried. "Anyone who'll treat a poor old man like that would sink a ship and the crew with it, just as you tried to do with the *Xenia*."

The statement had no effect on Slade, but as Nell's angry glance swept the trio she saw Martyn start, glance at Slade, and then grin.

"And you!" she flung at him. "You're as bad! A pirate! You stole my boat and left us marooned. There's twenty years in prison for that, more for you two for what you've done."

It silenced them. Slade and Flynn looked uneasily from the girl to Martyn. Nell was bending over Willie, whispering to him, trying to find signs of returning consciousness.

She was no longer afraid. Those ten days of ceaseless effort aboard the *Xenia* had brought her very close to John Reach and Willie. For all the flaming force of one and the fiendish appearance of the other, she knew them for what they were: two simple, honest men of kindly instincts, men capable of colossal effort, men in whom the hazardous years had failed to quench a thirst for the brimming cup of adventure.

Captain Slade was the first to recover from that threat of prison walls.

"Drag those two into the fo'c's'le," he commanded. "And we'll lock her in with 'em if she wants to play nurse."

The brutal nature of the taunt aroused Nell. She looked up to see Flynn and Martyn start forward and withdrew her hand from beneath Willie's head. The back of it struck the knife. The next instant she was on her feet, the weapon raised.

"I'll kill the first to touch me!" she said in a low voice, and she backed against the rail.

She spoke coolly, with unmistakable decision, and her eyes did not waver or did her hand tremble. Somehow she managed to convey an impression of controlled fury and of deadly purpose. And the trim blue

overalls and jumper, the short cropped brown curls, added an idea of masculine competence.

Yet beneath those curls was only a blurred conception of the situation and a confused sense of unreality. The blue sky, the fog bank rolling in from the west, the cries of gulls, the familiar broad decks of the *Xenia*, all were normal. Through the long days these things had become a part of her life.

But the three men armed with clubs, deploying from the two prone figures on the deck, moving swiftly to the left and right and center—they were new and strange and terrifying. They had been laughing a moment ago, but now their faces were grim and their knuckles showed white where the clubs were grasped.

Nell was afraid, terribly so. She saw no chance for escape, and she felt her legs become liquid at the thought that in another moment a club might crash across her skull as she had seen one first crash across Reach's and then Willie's.

A low moan reached the edges of her consciousness but did not draw her attention until she saw Willie's body move convulsively.

"Oh, you beasts!" the girl sobbed, and she seemed to explode in flaming movement.

Flynn fell back before a sweep of the knife, and the blue-clad figure whirled in mid-air and launched itself at the captain. Slade was caught unawares, was too slow in his movements, and the blade ripped down the length of his right forearm. Nell was about to strike again when Flynn and Martyn seized her. Martyn gave a vicious wrench and the knife fell to the deck.

"The little hell-cat!" Slade snarled. "Tap her on the head! Lock her up! Anything, so you can take care of this arm."

Blood was spurting from the wound and he was trying to stop it with his other hand.

"I wish it had been your heart!" Nell cried furiously, and then something snapped and she began to sob.

The girl sank to her knees and the two men released her.

"That's about as far as they go," Martyn laughed. "Needn't worry about her any more."

"Tie up the old man and then fix this," the captain interrupted. "Looks as if she'd got an artery."

Flynn made a tourniquet; but before he had applied it, Slade was so weak he staggered against the rail and had to be helped to a seat on the hatch.

"Better lock these two up while they're out," Flynn suggested. "We've had enough excitement."

Nell was lying motionless on the deck and the two men dragged Reach forward, then Willie, but when they returned the girl was gone. Slade had fainted.

"She can't get far," Flynn said. "The old man's keeled over. Sweet mess, ain't it?"

"So you tried to wreck this ship, eh?" Martyn asked abruptly.

"Where'd you get that?" Flynn growled, but his startled expression caused Martyn to smile.

"The girl said so. Besides, I'm not so dumb. What you planning to do now?"

"You're no saint, according to her."

"Don't claim to be," Martyn answered cheerfully. "Insurance racket, eh?"

Flynn looked uneasily at the captain, then at Martyn.

"It's a bad game!" he burst forth. "So long's this ship's on top o' the water, and if them three get out with the story!"

Martyn glanced about the decks.

"We could do it," he said. "Pump her out, take her to sea, open a few cocks. Them three—locked in the fo'c's'le."

"What you stringing with us for?" Flynn asked with sudden suspicion. "What you after?"

"Nothing," Martyn grinned. "But I'll string with you. And, when the jos's finished, the three of us can go out in the halibut schooner. I pick you up, see? After I'd lost my own crew."

"Sort o' neat for you, eh?"

"Maybe."

Martyn turned and examined Slade's wound.

"She's laid him on the shelf," he said before Flynn could voice his slowly dawning thoughts. "It's quit bleeding but it's got to be dressed. He won't be worth anything for a while. I'll stand watch here while you get some bandages and iodine from the medicine chest."

Flynn hurried away and Martyn walked to the rail, stared down at the halibut schooner, then looked across the *Xenia's* decks.

"Never thought she had it in her," he muttered. "She's shot her bolt, though."

BUT Martyn's interest in Nell's whereabouts evidently was not sufficient to start him searching for her. He leaped up on the hatch and for a full minute studied the shores and water to the east, then turned and looked westward. The fog bank was rolling in rapidly.

"Fine thing about these waters," he grinned. "Fog is good to you."

Flynn appeared with bottles and dressings.

"Where's your crew?" Martyn asked when he saw the other was watching him closely. "We need help for this job."

"Our boat was overturned in the surf and we were the only ones to get ashore," the engineer answered. "Don't know what happened to the other boat."

"How'd the ship get in here?"

"Must 'a' drifted in."

"Wasn't she sinking?"

"I don't get it!" Flynn exclaimed in exasperation. "She should 'a' gone down an hour after we left her. Someone—I think I know him; my second assistant, nosey chap—he must 'a' been hep."

"Turned off the seacocks, eh?" Martyn grinned. "What did you do to the engine and boilers?"

"Nothing. No use."

"And this nosey chap, was he on your boat?"

"In the other. I saw 'em putting back after a while. Maybe he told 'em. But the fog shut in."

"And they missed it. You may hear from 'em again, and you may not."

Martyn was smiling slightly, and with a suggestion of contempt. Flynn's perturbation was most evident.

"You're lucky to bump into me," Martyn continued. "If they got out with that story there'd be cops waiting in every port for you. Going with me, in the halibut schooner, you can get ashore anywhere and learn where the thing stands."

He waited for Flynn's face to brighten at the thought and then asked:

"Owner paid you yet?"

The engineer shook his head.

"Grand pair of suckers, you two."

They had been dressing the captain's arm as they talked, and when they had finished they carried him into an assistant engineer's room on that deck and laid him on the berth.

"He'll come around after a while," Martyn said.

"Look here!" Flynn exclaimed. "You've done a lot o' talking but you ain't told anything. What's this about your running off with the halibut schooner?"

"Don't sound good, does it, when you found me locked in the fo'c's'le?" Martyn sneered.

"Yeh, but that schooner wasn't there last night."

"No?"

"And one of her dories is on deck here."

"Well?"

Martyn felt secure in the presence of the slow witted engineer.

"There's something funny," Flynn growled. "You ain't no saint."

"And you wouldn't want me to be. Now I'm offering my help, and you'll need it and my boat to get out in, and you'll see that. Better be thankful for what you've got. Let's go below and see what the two have been doing."

"The girl——"

"She's through. There'll be time to find her after we see where we stand. Movin' this ship won't be any snap. We give her a quick once-over."

Nevertheless, Martyn walked to the run and looked eastward before he followed Flynn below, and he glanced with a grin toward the fog bank, which had reached the western end of the bay.

They went down into the engine room, leaving the decks of the *Xenia* deserted. The captain recovered consciousness and called, but there was no answer.

UP FORWARD, in the fo'c's'le, John Reach opened his eyes. His head ached terrifically and his arms and legs were numb. He could see Willie lying near by.

After much effort and pain, the big man freed his arms, then his legs, and sat up. Willie's bonds were loosened and water from a tap revived him.

"It looks like we come out second best," the old man said as he sat up. "There's enough things going on inside my head to drive this ship."

He looked around, recognized where they were, and swore.

"Steel doors! We got a fine chance to get out o' here."

"They'll sink her for sure this time,"

Reach added. "And forget to let us out."

"And if those two don't think of it, Martyn will. How'd he happen to come back? And where's Howard?"

"There wasn't time to ask," Reach grinned, and then he exclaimed fiercely: "The little lady! What they done with her?"

"I don't know, but we can't sit here and gab. Even a rat will bite the steel wires of a trap."

Up on deck the captain staggered out of the stateroom and looked about. He made his way to a hatch and sat down in the sun. Far beneath him he heard occasional sounds and knew what was happening. No one else was in sight and he assumed that things were working out well.

Smoke began to come from the great stack, the heavy black smoke of burning fuel oil. But it was not smoke that obscured the sun. The captain turned sharply and looked westward to find a great bank of fog rolling toward the *Xenia*. Five minutes later it had engulfed the *Xenia*. From amidships neither bow nor stern could be seen.

Down in the *Gray Goose*, which nestled close to the side of the big freighter, Nell was locked in her stateroom. There was a bit of comfort to be had amid familiar surroundings but it was not this which had brought her there.

Terribly afraid and her nerves shattered by the realization that she had stabbed a man, the girl had taken quick advantage of the departure of Martyn and Flynn with their prisoners. She was dizzy, and the sight of the captain swaying there on the hatch, and of blood on the deck, brought fresh panic. Suddenly the wounded man toppled over.

Nell heard Martyn's voice and in desperation she threw herself down behind the combing of the after hatch. There she lay while Flynn and Martyn talked, and what she heard brought coolness as if the words were cold water thrown in her face. These three would carry out their plan, sink the ship with Reach, Willie and herself locked in the fo'c's'le. It was then that she remembered the gun Howard had given her in Seattle, and as soon as Flynn and Martyn had gone below she slid down a rope to the schooner's deck and locked herself in her room.

The revolver was there. Drawers had been ransacked, her clothing was scattered

about, a clear indication someone had searched for the weapon. But Nell had placed it beneath the billowy skirts of a doll she had made as a mascot for her uncle when the *Gray Goose* was built, and which reclined indolently on a chest of drawers. The searcher had looked everywhere else.

The fact that anyone had sought the gun turned Nell's thoughts to Howard Boyd. He alone knew she had it, and yet he had not taken part in the attack on the *Xenia*. She had scarcely thought of him in the excitement of those strenuous moments. Now, in his absence, she discovered the first bit of evidence in his favor.

But even he could not remain in her thoughts. The long days of toil with John Reach and Willie had established a relationship between them and the girl which she had not consciously recognized until she saw them vanquished in the fight. It was unthinkable that such effort should be thwarted. Somehow, with the revolver, she must restore their ascendancy.

As she sat there the sunlight vanished and she looked out to the west to see the fog rolling in. Up in the hills that day it had brought only terror. Now she welcomed it, was disappointed by its first lack of density. She sat down with an effort at patience to await the thick, clammy blanket which she knew would come.

CHAPTER X

TREACHERY

NELL GRAY had never climbed a rope hand over hand, but she was determined that she would do so as soon as the jagged end of the wrecked wing of the *Xenia's* bridge could no longer be seen in the fog.

The time came sooner than she expected. When she opened the door, the vapor had become so dense even the bow of the *Gray Goose* could not be seen. Her door faced away from the steamship, and as she was about to slip forward around the pilot house she stumbled over a pair of shoes lying at the foot of the steps.

Because the shoes had not been there when she entered her room she stopped in amazement, and with further amazement she recognized them as a pair she had last

seen when she and Howard Boyd ate lunch together back in the hills the day she had discovered the body of the prospector.

A slight sound caused the girl to look up, and she saw a pair of stockinged feet disappear over the rail of the *Xenia* where the stern of the *Gray Goose* had been made fast.

Nell did not understand. If it were Howard, why had he not appeared before. And what did he intend to do? She wanted to call to him. She did call in a low voice, but no one looked over the rail and there was no answer.

Nell's impulse was to follow up that rope. The stockinged feet indicated an intention to move stealthily, but that thought did not fit the prints of those same shoes in the sand beside the dory. Reach and Willie had pointed out that Martyn would never attempt to navigate the *Gray Goose* alone, that he must have assistance. And any assistance meant willing cooperation. Perhaps the shoes had been removed for ease in climbing.

The thoughts were numbing, not so much because of their failure to lead to definite conclusions but because the girl found herself struggling again with the old desire that somehow, sometime, Howard's actions would be satisfactorily explained. It was all the more confusing because she could not understand why the matter should be so important.

She stood there, undecided, listening, watching the rail above her. She could not hear sounds of movement, of voices. The fog was very dense now. She believed she could feel it pressing against her, shutting her off from all the world. It produced a sensation of devastating loneliness and of hideous peril.

A hoarse shout broke the stillness. There was a note of surprise in it, and it was followed by another that was unmistakably one of warning. Other shouts came, and sounds of heavy feet on deck, and then in Howard's voice Nell heard:

"Reach! Willie! Come on!"

Nell Gray climbed the rope to the *Xenia's* deck. The harsh fibers bruised her soft palms, her arms were paralyzed by fatigue, but she kept on, hanging a moment, inching up, until she was able to lift herself over the rail.

She was no longer uncertain as to what

was happening. Curses, shouts, running feet, clubs striking steel plates—they could mean only a battle, and Howard Boyd, she knew, must be carrying the fight alone. As soon as her feet touched the deck she jerked the revolver from a pocket and ran across to the starboard side. There she saw, like ghosts in the fog, four dim figures beneath the bridge, but even the fog could not cloak what was happening. One man was retreating slowly before the clubs of the other three.

Nell dashed back to the port side, then forward and around the superstructure. There, as he gave ground slowly, lunging with an iron bar, she almost collided with Howard. Martyn and Flynn, clubs swinging, were driving him before them, and beyond was the *Xenia's* captain urging them on.

Howard was hard pressed and as he backed out into the open Martyn tried to slip past for a rear attack. Howard leaped forward, the bar held straight out like a fencer's foil, and caught the smaller man squarely in the face, sending him reeling away.

But the advantage was short-lived. Flynn sprang in with raised club before the young man could recover his balance.

Nell screamed, lifted and fired her revolver. It jerked upward, the shot high, but the sound of it was enough to halt the engineer. Howard sprang away.

"Give me that gun!" he commanded harshly, reaching back without looking at Nell. "I can shoot straighter."

Martyn was sitting on the deck. His face was bloody and he was whimpering.

"Sit down there beside him, you two," Howard ordered. "Where's Reach and Willie, Nell?"

"They're locked in the fo'c's'le."

"Go see how the door's fastened. If a key's needed, these chaps will have it."

Nell darted away in the fog, and when she came back Reach and Willie were with her.

"Here are some men who want to trade places with you," Howard said, and still he did not look away from his prisoners. "We'll herd 'em forward."

"And they'll not get out!" Reach shouted. "Willie and I've proved that. Where'd you come from, boy?"

"A long way," Howard answered shortly. "I don't know these other two but the

little rat blubbing there—I wish I'd poked this rod clear through him. Kick him onto his feet, Willie."

Willie did so, with a shrill whoop of joy. Martyn retreated.

"I'm with you!" he protested. "I had to play their game until——"

"He's the one who hit John from behind!" Nell interrupted passionately.

"And he kept me locked up in the *Gray Goose*," Howard added. "He goes with the rest. Come on, you three. March along."

THERE was strength and authority in that command. Nell was fascinated by it. Willie looked sharply at the man he had always referred to as "that ranch hand," and Reach slapped him on the back. A minute later the three men were prisoners in the fo'c's'le, the steel door was closed and the lock snapped on the outside.

"We'll have to rig up something better," Willie said after an examination. "Maybe separate 'em. A month is a long time to keep three men shut up."

A month!" Nell repeated.

"Sure!" Reach answered. "We're going to sail this ship right into Seattle, the four of us, and turn these rats over to the police."

He was beaming upon them, upon Nell and Howard and Willie. Nell thrilled to that glance, not only because she was included but because Howard Boyd shared with her.

"The four of us!" Willie cackled shrilly, his one eye glaring with a new and horrible light that Nell met with a happy smile. The more diabolical that glare, the more she loved this shriveled little old man.

"Of course," John Reach added. "You can always count on it. Pick up a crew, strangers, throw 'em into anything, and four out o' five will come through clean. The rats, like Tiny—they show up quick. But where you been, boy?"

All three were facing Howard. He was looking at the back of his right hand, and they saw it swelling even as they looked. A great welt was forming, too, across one side of his face. A little cry of pity burst from Nell's lips but John Reach laughed exultantly.

"They didn't get you down, though, did they?" he exclaimed proudly. "But where you been?"

Howard began with the afternoon he and Nell had been searching in the hills.

"Just after we separated I caught a glimpse of what looked like a streak of quartz on a hill over to the west," he explained. "I thought I could go have a look and still get back to meet Nell at the place agreed upon. But it was farther than I thought, past the creek, and when I got there I found it wasn't quartz but water seeping out and spreading over a smooth place. At a distance it looked white.

"It was then I saw the fog. It was coming fast and I knew I could never get back to meet Nell, and I suspected what it would be among those hills. The best scheme, as I saw it, was to get down to the beach and call to Martyn to blow the whistle as a guide.

"I got there just as the fog was shutting in. The dory was gone but when I called to Martyn I saw it coming. Only it was the second dory, with Martyn rowing. I told him what had happened and we went out to the *Gray Goose*. He rowed, kept his direction by the wake, with me watching from the bow. At that, we nearly missed her.

"When we got aboard, Martyn said he would have to turn on the air in the engine room and he suggested that I start a fire in the galley so as to have something warm for Nell when she came. I was taking a lid off the stove when I heard the door of the booby-hatch being closed, but I didn't think anything of it until I heard the motor start. Then, when I tried to get out, I found the door was locked.

"We got under way. I could hear the winch lifting the anchor and the vibration of the propeller. Of course I tried to get out but there was no chance. We ran slowly until we were outside and then went full speed all night. When morning came the fog was gone and we ran into a small bay. Learned that afterward. Couldn't see a thing, but could tell through the ventilator when the sun was shining.

"We stayed there a week, and nothing happened. Martyn must have had it all planned, for he had stocked the after cabin with grub. And I didn't know what he was up to, though he was at a disadvantage. He couldn't let me out because he couldn't handle me alone. And then I got it. He was trying to break me down.

"Of course, I knew you three were strand-

ed without grub or shelter, that Nell was probably lost in the hills, and I wasn't just sitting there. I went to work on the door. It was heavy oak, with big hinges and lock, and he had taken all the galley knives. Besides, I had to be quiet. Could use only the points of my pocket knife blades, and they got dull soon. My hands were blistered and so sore I could hardly hold the knife. The door was thicker than I thought. I didn't cut out enough. Green at that sort of thing.

"And Martyn used to spend most of his time sitting with his back to the hatch. He even slept there sometimes, and he threatened to shoot through the door if he heard me working. Didn't know whether he was bluffing about having a gun, either. It didn't give me much of a chance.

"Then one day he came to the ventilator and asked if I was ready to be sensible. He said he'd found the prospector's gold mine, that the prospector had been killed by a slide, and that we could have it to ourselves."

"That's where he went that first day!" Nell exclaimed. "And afterward he told us there was no gold to be found!"

"Sure," Howard agreed. "It explains a lot of things about the way he acted ever since we left Seattle. But now he needed me. He said you three were dead by this time, and that Reach and Willie were crooks anyhow and had planned to kill Nell, himself and me if we did find anything.

"I saw his game. He had to have me to help him get the *Gray Goose* out. I didn't give in right away. Played him along. The wind was blowing hard that day and I could work on the door without his hearing me. About the time he was ready to let me out I kicked the door open.

"Martyn was waiting for me with an iron bar and we had it out all over the deck. He caught me one clip and nearly had me. I got him down at last. I'm a lot heavier. Nearly choked him to death. I was seeing red then.

"But that rap on the head laid me out for two days. I couldn't do much but keep him prisoner in the fo'c's'le. Rigged some planks across the door and bound them around the hatch with rope. Slept right there.

"When I was stronger I found the chart and the bay where we had anchored. He

had laid out a course, drawn it in with a pencil, to the bay where we had gone farther east. I measured the distance and it checked with the time we had been running.

"But I had to make sure and went after Martyn. He talked enough, but what he said didn't agree with the chart."

"Why didn't you beat it out o' him?" John Reach growled.

"I tried to," Howard answered in a hard voice. "I was desperate, thinking about you three. Hauled him out on deck and knocked him down a few times. He must have guessed I couldn't go through with it for he kept on lying. So I locked him up again.

"There wasn't anything then but to try the course on the chart. Martyn had taught me a lot about the motor coming from Seattle, and I understood why. It started all right. The anchor was hard. Nearly pulled it through the hawse pipe. Ran all night and at daylight this morning I found the entrance we came through in the fog."

"That was navigation!" Willie exclaimed in his most ferocious manner.

"Luck!" Howard laughed. "Couldn't have been anything else. After I anchored I made sure Martyn was safe in the fo'c's'le, set the dory over and went ashore. There wasn't a sign of you folks and I rowed farther east past the point. Went back among the hills where I'd left Nell. I didn't even know whether she had gotten back to the beach or if you three were together.

"It was while I was back in the hills that I saw the masts of this ship and thought you'd be over here. But when I started to the dory I heard the engine of the *Gray Goose*, and the winch. When I got to the beach she was disappearing around a point, headed this way. I saw two men on deck.

"I followed in the dory and soon learned how those two got aboard. There was a raft floating, made of drift logs bound together with strips of tarpaulin. I thought they had something to do with the wreck, maybe were stranded, and of course they had set Martyn loose.

"So I didn't row right up to the ship. Hid the dory and climbed a hill. Saw the fighting on deck, so I waited for the fog and then came aboard."

CHAPTER XI

THE OPEN SEA

YOU came aboard, all right!" Willie cackled. "You may be a ranch hand but you've got the makin's of a sailor. Hey, John! Let's turn the rats loose and go at 'em again, even Stephen."

John Reach's eyes lighted at the thought. "It wouldn't be even, though," he chuckled. "Somebody got to the skipper. He looks as if he'd bled a lot. Using your knife, Willie?"

"I tried to, but they worked in behind me with a club, and I think the skipper's the one that did it."

Willie turned and looked at Nell accusingly.

"None of 'em was hurt the last I knew anything about it," he added significantly.

Nell's face paled at the thought of what she had done, and then she remembered how Slade had started to drag the little old man across the deck.

"There's a lot you don't know!" she exclaimed hotly. And she related all that had happened after Reach and Willie were knocked out.

Her own part in it had a startling effect on the old man. He stood staring at the girl with a new ferocity, but a tear formed in a corner of that glaring eye and rolled down his cheek to give way for another.

Nell's report of the conversation between Flynn and Martyn produced another effect. John Reach chuckled as he learned how accurate his surmises had been, but his great hands clenched when the girl told of Martyn's suggestion that the ship be sunk with all three locked in the fo'c's'le.

"Wish I'd killed him when I had him on the *Gray Goose*!" Howard exclaimed.

"We may have to do it yet," Willie snarled.

"Quit it, you three!" Nell protested. "Can't you understand? We're all safe now. Martyn and the other two can't get out. And we've got a job, taking this ship to Seattle."

"To Seattle?" Howard demanded in astonishment, but his question went unanswered.

The girl stood there, eyes dancing, face alight. Mist glistened on her disheveled curls. In blue overalls and jumper, head

up, feet braced as if for the roll of a ship, she looked like a competent sailor.

But the uniform did not hide her compelling spirit or warmth of fellowship. After the excitement of the morning they were jerked back to a realization of how closely they had been drawn together by the past and by what the future held.

But Howard did not quite understand, for the *Xenia* and her history were a mystery to him. The other three explained, talking at once, mingling what they had done with what they had intended in a most confusing manner. But he did understand that he was welcomed into a little, close corporation of dauntless souls. Softened voices, admiring glances, a desire to scatter warm praise—these told him more than words.

Willie was the first to withdraw from the unfamiliar ground into which emotion had swept them.

"Them three!" he cried shrilly. "Once we've pulled into deep water we'll set 'em ashore and leave 'em to starve."

"We will not!" John retorted. "We'd look fine, showing up with a ship that ain't damaged and the yarn we've got. They might jail us as pirates. Supposin' that other boat's crew is lost and these three should get out. It would be their story against ours. They could get us hung."

"But if we take them back with us as prisoners—" Nell began.

"That's it! I've kept the log ever since we came aboard. Everything's down to this morning, there's the four of us to swear to it all, and if we keep them three separated so they can't fix up a story, we're safe. This salvage business is ticklish any way you look at it, and lawyers can beat a map out o' what's due him.

"Now, Willie, you get below and see that the fires they started are going right. Lady, hunt the galley and fix up a meal. We all need one. Howard, you and me will look around for some cages to keep these rats in."

John Reach was again master of a vessel. A deck was beneath his feet and he issued his orders brusquely. His head was splitting from Martyn's blow, but no one would suspect it. And not since the *Gray Goose* left Seattle were his commands obeyed with such alacrity.

When night came, the flooded hold had been pumped nearly free of water. The

operation was stopped as soon as they were able to reach the sea cocks and close them, for it would be necessary to wait until noon the next day before tide conditions would permit an attempt to draw the *Xenia* into deep water under her own power.

The three prisoners were segregated before the pumps were started.

"Nothing like a steel ship for a jail," Howard laughed when that task was completed. "They haven't got a chance."

"But they'll bear watching better'n twenty-four hours a day," Willie warned. "Rats'll gnaw through anything."

"What are we going to do with the *Gray Goose*?" Howard asked at supper that night. "Tow it?"

"Couldn't do that," Reach answered with a glance at Nell. "Hate to leave that little ship but there's nothing else. We'll anchor her—until we come back."

"And if she's lost," Willie added quickly, "the three of us will make up her value out o' our shares of the salvage."

"Sure," Reach agreed. "But she'll be snug enough here."

THE next morning there was no fog and the halibut schooner was carefully anchored in a small cove which offered perfect protection. When Willie and Howard returned to the *Xenia*, where Reach had been tending the fires beneath the boilers, the work of pumping was resumed.

The rate had been carefully calculated and the hold was dry at half past eleven. The engine was started immediately, with Nell and Willie on the bridge, Reach and Howard in the engine room. The screw churned the water with the violence of a torrent. Willie dropped a drift lead from the port wing of the bridge, but for fifteen minutes he watched the line hang straight down.

"Never moved!" he exclaimed shrilly.

"Does that mean we can't do it?" Nell demanded. "Oh, we must, Willie! We must!"

"You stay here and stand watch," he answered as he ducked down the steps.

He went below, talked to Reach. The engine was stopped, black smoke poured from the funnel, and then, when they dared not let the gauges climb higher, they went full speed astern.

Even there in the engine room they knew they had won. The hull dragged jerkily through the sand. Willie leaped for the stairs but before he had disappeared the telegraph jangled and the indicator pointed to "Stop!"

"That girl!" Reach exclaimed, and his eyes were glowing. "You could put her up against anything."

"That's what I've been thinking since I got back," Howard said. "I—I've got a long way to go to catch up."

Reach laughed derisively.

"It's a long way to Seattle, boy, and there's nothing like the sea to give you the chance."

The telegraph stopped conversation. Willie was on the bridge asking for slow speed astern, and five minutes later for full speed ahead.

"Hope that's the last time I touch those controls until we enter Seattle Harbor," Reach shouted. "We're off, boy! We're off!"

He danced exultantly there on the galley, and then he stopped and grinned at Howard.

"First time it ever happened on a ship I'll bet. Here I'm skipper of this peddler and I don't know what's going on. We'll get out of the engine room until we make port. Wonder if Willie is going to show down for the entrance."

Willie did not. He went out the way the *Gray Goose* came in and it was not until Reach and Howard felt the heave of the ship in the first rollers of the open Pacific that they knew they were clear.

Up on the bridge Nell was receiving a lesson in steering a compass course.

"It's going to be you and me, miss, day and night, until we get there," the old man said. "The black gang won't be able to give us more'n six knots, and it'll take a long while."

"How far is it?" Nell asked.

"About eighteen hundred miles. That will take most two weeks. Think you can stand it?"

Nell understood he was teasing her and she laughed.

"I'll bury you at sea yet," she retorted, and Willie's one eye glared fiendishly as he went into the chart room to lay out their course and make the necessary entries in the log.

The girl turned exultantly to her task.

She had never known such a thrill. A touch of her hand, and she could alter the course of the great vessel. A little inattention, and they might become hopelessly lost out there in the fog enshrouded North Pacific.

Willie had impressed all that upon her. They were almost due west of Seattle, must steam through fog and gale, night and day, to strike an opening only fifteen miles wide, an opening many a ship had failed to find.

"They call it the graveyard of the Pacific, that lower end of Vancouver Island," the old man said. "There's a lot of fog and a lot of wind, with a current setting up the coast, and if you run a week without getting a sight, you can pile up on the beach before you know it. It's easier now, with radio compass bearings and the latest gadgets, but we're no better off than in the old days. So keep the lubber's line where it hangs."

It was not easy at first, and the great Pacific swells caused the bow to swing one way, then the other. But Willie taught her to anticipate these movements rather than struggle against them, and before darkness came he grumbled approval.

DOWN in the engine room Reach and Howard had no time to rest that first day, or to go on deck and see the others. They had fires under only half the boilers. It was all they could attend to, and power was generated for little more than half the *Xenia's* normal speed.

The great engine had to be watched ceaselessly, watched and oiled and petted and coaxed. It was on their minds constantly. Each sound of it became as much a part of life as their own breathing. Always there was the dread of new sounds, of those raspings or grumbings that foretell trouble.

Nor were the engines and boilers their sole worry. The condenser, many pumps, an electric light plant, the trim of fuel tanks, all the varied and intricate processes necessary for the propulsion of a great ship across the sea, these occupied every waking moment and filled their fitful cat naps with dreams.

New problems arose constantly. Howard's inept efforts had to be closely supervised. John Reach staggered about the

engine room, his head splitting, his great body weary, his eyes closing despite his will. At daylight, the second morning, Howard brought mattress and blankets and laid them on the grating.

"I'll call you if anything happens," he said. "Get some sleep."

On the bridge it was much the same. Always someone had to be at the wheel, giving his entire attention to it and maintaining a lookout. And always there was the problem of their course and speed. Nell quickly became familiar with these details and Willie's anxiety was soon her own. Their troubles were increased by the fact that the engine did not run evenly. Willie cursed but he said nothing to the engine room force. He understood the difficulties under which they worked.

"It knocks our dead reckoning," he told Nell. "I've rigged the patent log but something's happened to it. Propeller blade bent, maybe. Now, running eighteen hundred miles, we can't tell within fifty miles of where the coast is when we hit it."

He had taken a sight the second day and was able to compute their first twenty-four hours' run. It was at the rate of 6.2 knots. But the third day there was no sun, or the fourth and fifth, and not a star was to be seen at night. For a while the engine ran more evenly, as Reach and Howard mastered their task, and then new troubles arose.

"I didn't suspect you knew anything about steam," Howard marveled one day as Reach grinned after mastering a balky fuel pump.

"I don't know much," the big fellow laughed, "but being on ships all my life I've picked up a few ideas. And I have worked in engine rooms. Nothin' like this. Tugs mostly, and a whaler. But the principle's the same. You've got to work around all the fool gadgets, is all."

Once it was necessary to shut down for twelve hours when the "fool gadgets" got the better of Reach. Half a gale was blowing from the northwest and Willie stormed about the bridge, trying to estimate their drift.

"At this rate we won't know within a hundred miles of where we'll strike the coast!" he exclaimed. "With fog or rain, a dirty night and a gale on, we could pile up before we knew the beach was there."

Nell understood the old man's temper. It wasn't criticism. He was merely wrapped up in his task, and any task worth while, for Willie, must be accomplished by a certain ferocity of endeavor.

All this was enough. Two seamen, a landlubber and a girl operating a big steamship was in itself an achievement. The unending duties and anxieties, and the scant hours for sleep, imposed a tremendous task upon their physical and spiritual qualities. But added to such a task was the haunting dread that the prisoners would regain their liberty.

They never could escape from it. In the thrill of that moment when the *Xenia* shook herself from the grip of the sand, while they worried over course and speed, over boilers and journals, none of the four was able to forget that with each mile achieved the desperation of three men became greater.

CHAPTER XII

BIRDS IN THE COOP

THE *Xenia's* crew took every precaution. Captain Slade was given the run of the fo'c's'le. He was weak from loss of blood, his arm pained him intensely, and he was considered the least dangerous.

There was a small room, intended for carrying bullion or other precious cargo, far down in the ship, unlighted, ventilated only by a small barred opening, and in it Martyn was confined. Flynn was placed in a steel doored compartment beneath the fo'c's'le in which the mate's stores were kept.

"Rats," Willie always called them, but Willie had been the first to point out that even rats will gnaw at the steel wires of a trap. There could be no hope for the three, once they were landed in Seattle. Uncle Sam would attend to them gladly. Martyn and Slade and Flynn understood this and, understanding, they would welcome any risk.

"They ain't got a chance," Reach maintained each day. "With steel bulkheads, decks and doors, how they going to get out?"

Yet his very reiteration only served to show how he worried. They all spoke of it, of the impossibility of escape. Some-

times the dread of it lay like a dense fog over the ship. Each noon the three men gathered in grim silence in the galley. Howard carried the revolver, Reach a steel bar and Willie a tray of food as they went forth to visit the prisoners.

Up on the bridge Nell kept the big ship on her course. There was no thrill for her then. The time dragged interminably. Her thoughts were always on the possibility that her companions would open a door to find an empty cell.

That, Nell felt, would mean the end. Their problem was tremendous now. Heavy lids, pale, drawn faces and a lassitude broken by fitful energy told of the strain they were enduring. But to have a man loose on the ship, hiding in any one of a hundred places, slinking about the dark decks at night . . .

When the daily round was made, Captain Slade never spoke. Flynn frankly offered to trade his services to gain his liberty. Martyn groveled, recalled the days together on the *Gray Goose*, lied without rhyme or reason and promised the impossible.

Whenever they had time to spare, night or day, Reach, Willie or Howard made a round of the prisons, walking in stocking feet, standing at the doors and listening for the scratching or tapping that would indicate an attempt to escape.

To Nell fell the task of feeding seven people and keeping the galley in order. Except for the prisoners, she could not provide regular meals. The three men might find opportunity to eat in any hour of the twenty-four. The girl did the best she could, even stole precious sleep time to make pies.

As the long days and nights passed and their goal drew nearer, the tension would have become unbearable had it not been for the growing conviction that they would win through. Weary, nerves taut, weighted by the various perils they faced, there were moments when the drama of their undertaking gripped them, when something sang within them as they felt the great ship move steadily on her way and realized that she did so only because of their strength.

"We're going to win! We're going to win!" That's what the propeller is saying as she shakes the ship!" Nell cried gaily one morning as she relieved Willie at the wheel.

"Where are we at? Where are we at?" is more like it," he retorted in his shrill voice. "Ain't had a sight for five days."

"We'll get one this noon. The clouds are breaking. The wind is west."

Willie had been called to the engine room for a consultation and Nell was left alone above decks. All around was the gray, empty sea, ceaseless in its movement, endless in its possibilities of danger and surprise. Beneath her feet she could feel the whole of the great ship, its lift and roll, the slow shudder of the engine. And with one hand she could turn and control it at will!

It was a moment of supreme ecstasy for Nell. She exulted in the power that was hers, in the achievement of the four of them, in the success that now seemed so certain. And most of all she exulted because, down in the hot depths of the ship, ~~telling~~ ceaselessly, was Howard Boyd.

Nell did not carry that thought very far. She only knew she was supremely happy that he was there, that in the rare times when she saw him, his face was drawn and gray but his shoulders were straight and his head was carried higher than ever before.

Willie shot the sun at noon and complained bitterly because his dead reckoning was ten miles off.

"It seems to me that's marvelous," Nell said.

"Enough to put us on the beach," he grumbled. "If there's a fog, or rain——"

"We'll make it if there is," she maintained confidently, and she laughed when he glared at her. "Besides, that ten miles might be due to my steering."

"It is not!" he retorted fiercely. "Think I haven't been checking you, up above with the standard compass? You've got all these young squirts o' quartermasters beat."

"Go get some sleep, you old grouch," she retorted.

"If you was a man I'd knock you down!" he cried, but he went into the chart room and threw himself down on the mattress they had brought from the captain's stateroom.

NELL knew he was near exhaustion, and in that moment she felt very tender toward the old man. She had adopted an abusive tone in talking to him because she sensed that he did the

same to cover his real emotions. But neither deceived the other. They were a strange pair, the impulsive girl and the sea-hardened sailor, but they were living through an experience that brought them very close together.

So Nell let Willie sleep long past the time when he should have relieved her. Her whole body ached as she stood there, swaying ceaselessly to the motion, little hands gripping the spokes, eyes smarting from the strain of watching the swaying compass.

Her fatigue was shattered by a dark smudge on the horizon directly ahead. It was the first smoke they had seen, the first indication that the sea was peopled by others than themselves: For half an hour she watched the spot enlarge, saw the hull of a ship appear beneath it.

It was a large Canadian liner, speeding to the Orient, and as it swept past Nell stepped out onto the wing of the bridge and waved. She was greatly excited, and she felt a glow of triumph, but she did not realize the spectacle she presented. The *Xenia's* decks were lifeless. She was proceeding at half speed. No lookout stood in the bow, no officer paced the remnant of the bridge. The big freighter wallowed along, and all that officers and passengers of the liner saw was a girl clad in blue overalls and jumper waving a greeting.

Nor did Nell know that glasses were trained upon her and the *Xenia*, that the liner's wireless had been barking at her, and continued to do so, or that a few minutes after it had passed a message went back to the world that the lost *Xenia* was bound inward under her own power and that, so far as the liner's officers could determine, she was navigated only by a girl.

Nell went back to the wheel, put the ship on her course and then tiptoed into the chart room. There she entered in the log the fact that they had passed the *Empress of Rupertsland* at 5:16 P. M., and she added the irrelevant remark, for Willie's benefit, that the liner, with her white hull, presented a beautiful sight.

Willie found the entry a few minutes later when he wakened. The next instant he was dancing beside Nell.

"Why didn't you call me?" he shrieked. "Now there's hell to pay! She looked pretty, did she? So'll we when every tug and salvage boat in the sound comes out to take the *Xenia* away from us."

"But they can't," Nell protested.

"They'll try, and if we get into trouble—engine, landfall, fog, currents—they'll have us."

"But what would you have done?"

"Changed the course, kept out of their way."

"Go back to bed!" Nell scoffed. "Worry's made you timid. Any more talk like that and I'll have Captain Reach put you in the engine room."

It was their last day of fine weather. A southeaster caught them at midnight and they wallowed through it for two days. There were times when the *Xenia* made no headway. Willie scolded and bemoaned the shattering of his dead reckoning.

He had to get some sleep in that forty-eight hours of turmoil and Nell was left alone at the wheel. Half of one black night she stood there, striving desperately to keep the *Xenia* on her course, watching the white crests of the great waves leap out of the darkness, pile up over the bow and come thundering across the deck.

When the gale died, the rain came, hemming in the ship. They were close to the coast now, but the gray curtain cut visibility to a mile. Willie was on the bridge constantly. His one eye glared as fiercely as ever but his legs trembled from fatigue.

Down in the engine room the black gang knew what was happening.

"How you like it?" John Reach grinned at Howard. "If we pile up you want to be careful and not get thrown into anything."

"We won't pile up," the young man said. "You told us once Willie could smell his way anywhere."

"That was in the Aleutians."

"He will here. Why, we can't lose at this thing, John! We can't! We've got to get through. After all we've done, two weeks of solid hell! Say!" And he laughed. "Know what I'm going to do when we make port?"

"Get a shave?"

"Sleep. Right there on that mattress. I'm——"

The telegraph, which they had not heard for fourteen days, jangled warningly and the indicator swung to "Stop!" Reach leaped for the controls, and when the big engine was still he waited for the expected signal to reverse.

"Here's where we hit," he whispered.

But nothing happened. In the unaccustomed silence, both men stood ready.

"Do you suppose—one of those three?" Howard faltered.

"You go, boy! Can't leave these controls. Take the gun."

Howard was already springing upward with it. Reach wanted to follow but dared not. If Willie were feeling his way close to the coast, everything might depend upon an instant application of power. Reach listened for sounds of conflict, a shot, his hands gripping the controls. The bell, and the indicator swung to "Full Speed Ahead!"

Howard reached the bridge just in time to see Nell fling her arms about Willie's neck and kiss him. At least, in the darkness on the bridge, he guessed that was what she was doing.

"Let go me!" the old man cried shrilly. "Stop this nonsense. We got to get under way again."

But Nell did not release him until she saw Howard standing there.

"We've made it!" she cried, and she grasped both his hands and tried to draw him into step with her own ecstatic dancing. "Smack on the nose! Willie did it! Smelled his way in. That!" And she drew him out onto the wing and pointed ahead, where a red light and a white glowed close together. "That is the Swiftsure Bank Lightship. And just one hundred and thirty-three miles on the other side of it is Seattle."

Willie had already jerked the handle of the telegraph and they could feel the vibration of the propeller.

"Why did you stop?" Howard asked.

"I did it," Nell answered. "Willie was asleep. The rain quit suddenly and right there in front of me were those lights. Of course I signaled you to stop until I could call Willie."

Howard dashed away.

"John thinks we were ready to pile up," his voice came back from below. "Got to tell him."

TUGS found the *Xenia* soon after dawn, inside Cape Flattery. Nell was at the wheel, Willie asleep after a long night. The first came close up on the port side.

"Ahoy, there!" the skipper shouted. "Want a tow?"

Nell walked out and looked down.

"No, thank you," she answered with a smile.

"Well, I'm damned!" the skipper exclaimed. "I mean—I— Say! You're hardly making headway against this ebb."

"Does the tide always run one way here?" Nell jeered.

A roar of laughter came from beneath and she looked down to see John Reach leaning over the rail.

"Hey, you scavenger!" he shouted to the tugman. "Not a line comes aboard this ship except from a wharf. Get that? And tell it to the rest of the beachcombers."

"It won't hurt your salvage claims any, taking a tow."

"We're taking no chances."

"How many you got abroad there?"

"Enough."

"The girl your skipper."

"Yes, and she's got papers for any tonnage, any ocean."

Other tugs came that morning, and a big salvage craft. Nell waved them aside with a smile, or Willie swore at them. A big white Diesel yacht passed, and she exhausted her air tanks in whistling, while crew and guests waved frantically.

"How do they know about us?" Nell asked in amazement.

"It's your work," Willie answered contemptuously. "Lettin' that liner get a look at us. She's wirelessed."

At noon a small, swift craft appeared and swung in under the port side. Nell had just been relieved at the wheel and she answered its hail.

"You want to tow us, too?" she laughed.

The girl laughed easily that day. The impossible had been accomplished. Willie and John and Howard and she—gales and fog and bloodshed and despair—a huge ship stranded in a far corner of the earth and four pigmies pushing it off into deep water and driving it across a great ocean. The refrain sang joyously through the girl's weary mind and sent an itching desire to dance down trembling legs to tired toes.

"No, we just brought you some news," a young man called from the deck of the swift craft. "The *Xenia's* second boat, with twenty-five of her crew, was picked up two weeks ago. They told a story of the captain and engineer wrecking the vessel. The second assistant engineer found the sea cocks in the engine room open and

closed them. The owner, in San Francisco, committed suicide as soon as he read the story in the papers. Insurance people sent two ocean-going tugs out to look for the ship because it was believed to be floating around without a soul on board. And Uncle Sam sent a coast guard vessel to hunt for the captain and engineer."

"We have them aboard," Nell said.

"You have? Don't they know——"

"Oh, they know, all right. We've got them locked up."

"You're bringing them back prisoners? Wow! That's great stuff. But who are you, and how many of you are there? And how did you happen to find the *Xenia*?"

He seemed so enthusiastic Nell found herself telling him all about it, while Willie grumbled at her from the wheel. For fifteen minutes she hung over the bridge rail, talking to the agreeable young man.

"And you, Miss Gray—were you the cook?"

Willie could not stand that. He left the wheel and rushed out.

"Cook!" he shouted down. "She's been worth any ten o' you tooth-brushin', slick-haired ranch hands. She's worked at the pumps until her hands were raw. She's stood her watch at the wheel, day and night, gale and fog, for fifteen days. And she's going to be at the wheel when we take this ship into Seattle Harbor. If you don't believe it, come along and watch."

The little craft left.

"Thanks!" the young man called up to Nell. "I'm from a Seattle paper and this is the story of the century. I'll see you at the dock. Got to have pictures."

It was nine o'clock the next morning when the *Xenia* altered her course off West Point and Seattle lay across her bow. Two weary men labored in the engine room. A one-eyed fiend and a girl, with great shadows beneath her eyes but a flashing smile on her face, were on the bridge.

A Bainbridge Island ferry passed with whistle cord held down. A great, green-hulled liner, China bound, bellowed frantically. A yacht came from astern and circled the freighter while crowded decks cheered madly.

"Sounds like Fourth o' July," Willie grumbled. "What's got into 'em?"

Nell kissed the fierce old lips and danced out to acknowledge the greeting, and upon her appearance the cheering doubled.

Other vessels came, yachts, tugs, all the conglomerate craft of a busy harbor, all with shrieking whistles and delirious people on deck. They flanked the *Xenia*, trailed in behind, and led the way.

"Damn fools!" Willie growled. "Clutterin' up the fairway."

"Keep quiet!" Nell scolded. "You don't know how lucky you are, being up here where you can see and hear. John and Howard—they don't even know where we are. They're missing it all, all the best part of the voyage."

They did it at last, in full view of a water-front packed with cheering men and women—tied the *Xenia* up to a wharf without assistance, just as they had set her afloat far out to the westward.

BUT it was three days before the valiant four were able to get together alone. The prisoners were in jail, there were no indications of opposition to the payment of a huge salvage. For a brief time a whole city seemed to devote its entire time and attention to them alone.

There was silence and a bit of embarrassment as they confronted one another.

Even Nell's high spirits seemed tamed. "Wonder how the *Gray Goose* is getting along?" John Reach broke the awkward spell. "She was a sweet little ship."

"Was!" Nell cried in alarm. "You don't think—?"

"She's all right, I guess. Don't see what could 'a' happened to her."

"I been thinking about her, too," Willie said. "Sort o' expected to quit the sea after getting the *Xenia* in, but it don't seem just right, leaving the *Gray Goose* up there."

"And the gold," Howard added. "That——"

"The four of us!" Nell broke in impetuously. "I don't know—it seems to me—why, we can't break up now. It wouldn't seem like living without all of you."

John Reach pulled a piece of rock from a pocket. It was polished from much handling and there was a yellow tracery in it.

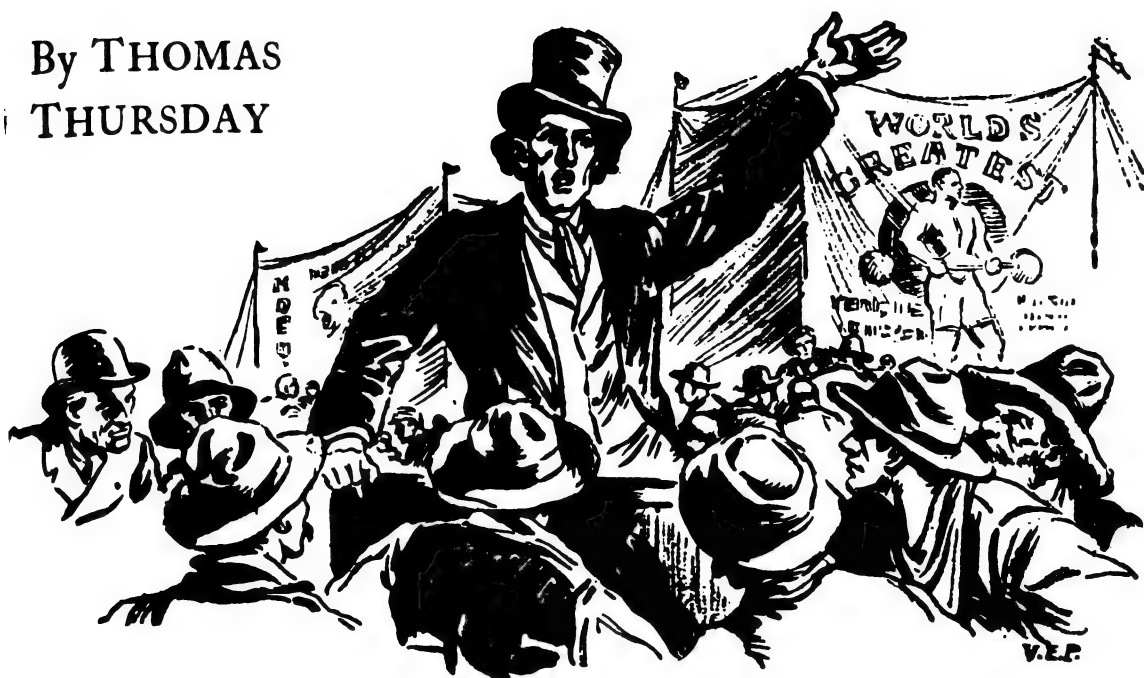
"There's a boat leavin' for Ketchikan tomorrow," he said.

"We'll catch it!" Willie exclaimed.

"And from there," Nell added quickly, "We'll get a small boat to take us—take us out to the westward."



By THOMAS
THURSDAY



AND HOWE!

Another Breezy Narrative of the Sideshows

ONCE upon a time a snappy old hombre, named George Bernard Shaw lassoed a workable fountain pen and proceeded to dash off the following load of horse feathers:

Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

For positive proof of Kid Shaw's startling statement we'll take for our text today Mr. Henry Harrison Howe, the lad whose knowledge surpassed his ability. Make yourself comfortable, boys and girls, and I'll try and finish this tasty tale before any of us fall asleep.

Since my name ain't quite as well known as Charley Lindbergh, I better break down and confess my identity, as I know some folks don't care to get too familiar with strangers. In round numbers, I'm Doc McKeezick, and at the time the following eye opener transpired, I was managing the sideshow with Ike Sullivan's "Wild West Rodeo and Freak Hippodrome."

Well, to stir up some action, as the Marines remarked to Sandino, we was playing a Western slab called Angelharp when

the cultured and gentlemanly Howe loomed into view. At that moment I was having what is known as a hell of a lot of trouble with my ballyhoo talker, Foghorn Finnegan, who got the weird notion in what passed for his head that his job was worth at least one hundred bucks per week, without counting tips.

"Listen, Doc," says he, just before we opened the show, "did you tell Old Man Sullivan that I craved bigger and better wages for driving these cowboys and bad bimbos into the show?"

"He said he wouldn't pay Herb Hoover or Al Smith that much," I retorts in a well modulated voice.

"Then tell 'at ape to hire a new boy!" he yelps. "I am all washed up. This baby is headed for the mild and wooly East. Alley oop!"

"You wouldn't leave me cold, would you?" I demands.

"As frigid as Mr. Zero's grandpop," he says. "If Sullivan can't pay top price for a top guy, I am headed for the land of New York, out where the East begins.

Toodle-oo, Doc. Hope to see you along Broadway!"

"If so," I says, quite the bit annoyed, "I hope you will be nestling in a manhole."

Exit Mr. Finnegan and enter Bill Dolen, our highly imaginative public relations man, which is a new and fawncy name for press agent.

"How's things breaking?" begins Bill.

"Over my head," I says. "That bindle stiff I had talking on the ballstand just give me a load of lip and departed hence."

"Fine!" whoops Bill. "It's time you got a real orator. I can promote you an old chap who can recite Shakespeare by the yard, Plato by the foot, and all the classics by the ream. As for delivering a talk, he can spot Washington sixteen senators and drown them out."

"What is it?"

"Met him at the Sagebrush Café," goes on Bill. "He's short of pennies, and I think he would be tickled silly to work for you. He was a trifle pie eyed when I saw him last, but genius and gin are twins. But it isn't a habit, he claims."

"Just a thirst, hey? Er, what makes you think this monkey can deliver a spiel from the ballstand?"

"I'll let you sample this boy for yourself," says Bill. "Back in moment."

Ten minutes later Bill came ambling down the midway, towing a tall, angular guy, who looked like a cross between a Florida kumquat and a full-page advertisement for the latest in hair tonics. He had plenty of wool, what I mean! More, he's wearing a cutaway coat and a stovepipe kelly, that passed out of style when grandpop played with rattles.

"This is Mister Henry Harrison Howe," says Bill. "Mister Howe, shake hands with Dock McKeezick, one of the best known grifters in the business."

"I am charmed to meet you, sir," quacks Mons. Howe, offering a clammy hand. "This gentleman has prevailed upon me to accept a position with you as a—er, what did you say it was, Mister Dolen?"

"Ballyhoo spieler," says Bill. "In other words, a boob buster."

"Gracious me," moans Howe, "what on earth is that?"

"Let's get down to business," I suggests. "I want some piffle peddler to get up on that stand and tell all the cowboys, rangers, or what have you, one fairy tale after

the other. Explain to them that we have the greatest show on earth, Barnum and Bailey be blowed. Eh, did you ever talk in public before?"

"Yes, indeed," he admits. "For a number of years I lectured on conceptual psychology, art psychology, symbolic psychology, efficiency psychology, and——"

"You should ought to be a riot," I says. "Follow me into the tent and I'll give you the regular spiel that I want you to hurl at the audience."

I shoved him inside, grabbed the type-written lecture out of the trunk, and tossed it to him.

"Here's the goo," I says. "Take it home and study it for a hour or so, then come back and I'll try you out."

"This," says he, after a quick examination, "is very, very bad. It impresses me as an insult to even moronic audiences. If it is all the same to you, my dear sir, I shall take this back to the café and revise it."

"Make it snappy," I begs. "The whistle on this factory will blow in less than no time, if not sooner."

He returns a half hour later, looking as serious as arsenic on tripe.

"Glad to see you back so quickly," I says. "We are ready to shoot the first ballyhoo."

"Shoot—the what?" he demands. "I just loath the sound of firearms."

"In plain Websterian," I explains, "I aim to start this show pronto and immediately. Are you sure you can make a nice speech to the gun-toting lads?"

"With pleasure," he says. "I have revised your weird lecture and made it more refined and instructive."

I GAVE orders to the boys to slam the Chinese gazinka—the gong that wakes up the slick and the dead—and pretty soon the ballstand is crowded with a large assortment of tough and ready Western hombres. The Hon. Howe mounted the stand beside me and Abe McGill, the Fire Eater, and posed like a backwards politician addressing a hicknic.

"Just a moment, Socrates," I says to my new orator. "I will say a few introductory remarks, then introduce you as the speaker of the day."

I stepped to the front and unwound a fair line of assorted goo-ga.

"In conclusion, lay-dees and gents," I says, "I will introduce to you a man who is known the world over for his wonderful flow of words, a hombre who has spoke before kings, queens and what have you. This guy——"

I feel a jerk at my coat-tail. I whirl around and behold no less than Mr. Howe.

"Good Lord," he whispers, "what a speech! My dear sir, I beg you to retire and permit me to save the situation. Do!"

I did. He removes his hat with the greatest of culture, brushes back his flowing mane, then slips his hanky up his right sleeve. Next, he bows like Lord Chesterfield and gets down to business.

"Mister Chairman, ladies and gentleman," he begins, in a deep bass voice, "before I call your attention to the various uncouth exhibits within this tented pavilion, it is my desire to speak a few words in reference to bio-psychology. It is my idea that all lectures should be instructive. Now, my dear friends, I feel assured that you will be glad to hear that bio-psychology has cured arterio-sclerosis and nervous indigestion, suicidal mania, exhaustion, defective vision, epilepsy, palsy, asthma, deafness, goiter, kleptomania, domestic troubles, insanity, prostate trouble, rheumatism, universal arthritis, (*Hot poultice! Imagine this in front of a sideshow!*) shell shock, ptosis and colitis, fever, panic, dementia praecox, imbecility, and——"

While the audience opened their traps in amazed wonder, the old beezark went on in that strain for five minutes, then switched to a history of malaria in the land of Panama and, as he was about to unload some facts about the proper diet for crocodiles, I noted the customers backing away.

I promptly grabbed him by the arm and yanked him backward.

"What and the hell is the idea?" I yelps. "The crowd is beating it. Step back, shut up, and maybe I can save the wreck."

With a pained look in his eyes, the profound orator folded his arms and let forth a few well bred snorts. I rushed to the front and tried to interest the remaining crowd with the regulation hooey about the freaks, but they gave me a brace of ha-ha's and a couple or three ho-ho's and beat it down the midway. This makes me extra peeved at the work of Henry Harrison Howe, don't think it didn't!

"What a fine flop *you* turned out to be!" I snaps. "Who in Gehenna did you think you was talking to, the College of Physicians and Surgeons? Why didn't you recite the hokum lecture I gave you to study, hey?"

"I am sorry, indeed, my dear sir," he says, "but I refuse to degrade myself with such rubbish. I really thought——"

"Yeah," I admits, "that's the trouble. You should never ought to do any heavy thinking in front of a sideshow audience. Serve 'em with a large order of boloney, seasoned with whoop-la. Meantime, I have, a idea you are canned. Try Bawston."

"I am also sorry," he confesses, in a less haughty tone. "It seemed to me that the people would enjoy a higher form of lecture, even though it was delivered in front of a freak show. Well, many thanks for the opportunity, my dear sir. Frankly, I wish I had pleased you; I am rather embarrassed from a financial standpoint, and I do not know what is to become of me. Well, good day, sir."

He started to walk away with such a hangdog look that I felt a bit sorry for him. I did some speedy thinking. The only trouble with the lad, I figured, was that he was a educated gent among a lot of roughneck showmen. What to do? What to do?

"Wait a minute, kid!" I bellers after him. "If you really want something to do, and will take any portfolio to keep the wolf from the old homestead, I'll try and fix you up."

"Thanks awfully," he smiles. "I'd be glad to accept any—er—legitimate position."

I brought him over to the big top and told Horse Collars Hawkins, our treasurer, that Howe was a gem of a gentlemen, and what could he do for him?

"If this bird is just *half* as honest as you say he is, we need a ticket taker right now, and he's got the job," says Horse Collars. "No fooling, it would be a positive novelty to have a boni fide gent around this trick. Follow me, bimbo!"

Howe thanks me with much dignity and walks off with Hawkins. Meanwhile, I walk back to the sideshow escorted by a headache. I need a ballyhoo spieler, and how!

I find Bill Dolen lolling on the bally-stand.

"That gil you wished on me would of been okay lecturing at Yale and Harvard," I says, "but as a boob-biffer he was like the Indian Ocean—all damp."

"So?" cooes Bill. "Well, I'll dig you up another. I'll wire a ad into *The Billboard* for the best outside talker in My Country 'Tis of Thee, and it will catch their next issue. Be good."

About a week later, while we was annoying a drum called Hicksap Gulch, Bill comes up to me with a letter in his hand.

"Get a load of this," says he. "This baby looks like your man."

Here's the news:

Dear Doc McKeezick:

I have accepted that job advertised in The Billboard. Ever hear Bryan talk? I'm better. Salary to start will be small; salary to finish will be big. See you soon after this letter of acceptance arrives.

*Yours 'till Sitting Bull stands up,
C. Reginald Smythe.*

"He ain't no trouper," I says. "No showman ever parts his name in the middle; if he did, the boys would part his beezer in the middle. What do you make of it? It looks like a portion of horse feathers to me."

"Never cross a bridge before it's built," advises the sage Bill. "Maybe this lad will turn out to be a whirlwind."

"With the accent on the wind," I says.

JUST before we opened the sideshow the next day, a cloud of dust appears at the far end of the midway, and a moment later the town's only taxi careens up to the ballstand. Before it could halt, a snappy looking lad leaps out of the back seat, trips on his ear, and comes up smiling. He's dressed a shade better than the Prince of Wales, meaning Panama hat, pearl gray spats, latest-from-Broadway suit, and a malacca cane.

"Greetings!" he grins. "If I am not mistaken, you are Doc McKeezick my new employer. In short, I'm your new man, C. Reginald Smythe. Put 'er there, big boy!"

Before I have a chance to open my trap, the breezy lad grabs my hand and pumps it snappily.

"Er, just the one moment," I begs. "What's it all about? Right now I am somewhat busy."

"That's the sort of man I crave to work

for—busy!" he says. "Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it—only better! The world is my oyster and I intend to open it!"

"If bunk was meat," I sniffs, "you'd be a boloney factory. Lads who can actually *do* things, don't yelp about it."

"That's just why I am different," he retorts. "I can both tell you how good I am, and then prove it. How does that strike you, old thing?"

"Come with me, scissors-bill," I requests, and pushed him into the tent. I grab the old typewritten lecture and shove it into his mitts. "I want you to read this, study it, then get up before a audience and spill it."

He takes the lecture, squats on some rolled sidewall canvas, and begins to read. While he was thus engaged, he let forth various and sundry snorts, sniffs, grunts, groans, or what have you in the ice box, Fritz?

"'S'matter—sick?" I asks.

"Hell no," he replies, "but this mess is! Woof, what a fine load of embalming fluid. Do you mean to say that a crowd will stand and listen to this? Reads like a love story in *The Gal's Home Pal*. Well, no matter. I can change it in a jiffy!"

"Do it and I'll brain you," I says with my usual politeness. "The first guy changed it, and the last seen of him he was collecting tickets over at the big top. In other words, wise biscuit, he was a terrible bust!"

"Oh, I won't harm it any. Just wish to brighten up the dead. Gimme a pencil, big boy, and I'll strut my stuff."

Fifteen minutes later he came back, with a smile from here to there.

"Now I'll show you something!" he whoops. "Get me a crowd and I'll turn them into your show so fast you'll think it's done by magic. Alley oop!"

Of course, I figured that Mr. C. Reginald Smythe was a large order of choice and fancy tropical air. Ain't I read hundreds of fiction stories where the blowhard turned out to be a flat tire, and the modest, unassuming fathead won the prize, the girl, and eventually worked his way up to be president of the Unholy Silk Sock Corporation? And did not the blowhard accept the portfolio of third assistant janitor in the same corporation? I'll tell the Turpin-eyed world I have!

Well, *hombres*, strange as it may seem, C. Reginald Smythe mounted that bally-stand and reeled off the best ballyhoo spiel I have ever heard on a midway. When he whooped about the so-called freaks we had on the inside of the tent I almost believed him myself. When he finished, the sombreroed lads stepped up to the box office and bought tickets almost as one man. No fooling, I thought I was dreaming! Speaking of personality, my new hired help had large quantities of "it".

"*Magnifico!*" I says in my best Spanish. "You surprised me, and you go on the pay roll at fifty smackers per week. And if Old Man Sullivan lets forth a whinny of protest, we'll both quit. *Ér*, which show did you work on before?"

"None," says he. "This is all Greek, Hindu and Patagonian to me."

"You wouldn't kid *me*, would you?" I asks.

"Honest, Mister McKeezick," he retorts, grinning boyishly, "this is my first experience. To be frank about it, I was formerly a dull and sluggish clerk in an old bookshop, until I happened to run across this book called 'Why Be a Failure?'"

He reached in his hip pocket and pulled out a small green bound book and patted it fondly.

"Before I read and studied this book," he continues with the greatest of enthusiasm, "I was dead, but too lazy to close my eyes. But after I read it and studied it—hot coffee!—I was a new man. I decided to get out of the city and try my luck at anything. Then I chanced to see your ad in *The Billboard*, and—well, here I am, big boy. Eh, would you care to read it?"

"I ain't got any time to go in for art and science," I says. "My head ain't the right shape to receive any culture."

Just between us, as the ham remarked to the sandwich, I didn't believe a word he says about the book waking him up, or that he was formerly a clerk in ye booke shoppe. Howsoever, as long as he made good with the kid-show, I wouldn't of cared if he told me that Amelia Earhart was his only daughter!

"As to fifty a week," he goes on, "that will be fair for a start—but not for a finish. As to that, the books says——"

"I'd rather not hear any more about the

book," I says. "I am now giving you *beaucoup* pennies, and I will have to black-jack Old Man Sullivan to get him to slip you that. Be nice!"

"Well, we can take that matter up later," he continues. "But please understand that I will require bigger and better wages in the near future. The book says——"

"Book be blowed!" I snaps and walks away briskly.

Well, during the rest of the date at Hicksap Gulch the kid-show played to fine business, thanks to the snap and pepper of C. Reginald Smythe. Just to show his versatility, he wrote and tried out two new lectures, and both went over like Lindbergh—big. He gave all credit to the little book, "Why Be a Failure?" and I thought he was kidding.

OUR next stand was laboring under the title of Yahula, and Mons. Smythe went over bigger and better than ever. Even Old Man Sullivan broke down and confessed that my new ballyhoo talker was worth at least *half* of his salary.

"I admit he's a nifty crowd crammer," says the Old Man, "but fifty berries per week is enough for five or six senators. See if you can slice off ten!"

"I am thinking of adding on ten," I snorts.

"Okay," says he, "if you take it out of your own poke!"

Next day things began to pop.

I was reposing on the ballystand, dreaming of the net profits—for the boss—when I felt a tap on the shoulder. Turning around, I beheld nature's gift to womanhood; i. e., Abe McGill, the Fire-Eater.

"Lo, Doc," begins Abe.

"Howdy, Abe," I says. "How's tricks?"

"Rotten," moans he. "How can they be good in show business? That being understood, I have called to announce my retirement from the grift in a coupla three weeks, if not sooner."

"Good luck," I says. "Which same you'll need."

It's a hobby of mine never to pay any attention to the squarks of kid-show freaks. During the season it is customary for them to quit at least twice a week while under a thirty week contract.

"Get the idea out of your nut that I am kidding," flares Abe. "For two cents, I'd blow this show right now!"

"Sorry I ain't got the two cents," I retorts. "Er, what do you aim at doing?"

"Plenty," he says. "I been reading and studying a book and I have found out that I am a sucker."

"You could of got the same information by asking me," I returns. "Know any more bedtime stories?"

"All my life I have wanted to be a great actor, and the book says that a guy can be whatever he wants to be."

"Sure," I admits. "Look at me for the very good example. I wanted to be President but a lad named Coolidge beat me to it. Meantime, stick to fire-eating and eat tasty and often."

"Stick to your uncle!" he snorts, getting red headed. "I am going to be a great actor, and I don't mean I just reckon so."

"Well," I says, "for all I know, maybe you could play the part of a clown."

"I am gonna study Shakespeare, and play the main parts," explains Abe with the greatest of innocence.

"See if that annoys me," I says, and Abe snorts and beats it into the tent.

A few minutes later, several of my best freak attractions stroll out of the tent, each carrying a copy of the little green bound book. Baby Bessie, the One-Ton Girl, led the parade, followed by Lulu Labelle, the Albino Beauty, Lord Leano, the Georgia Hairpin, and Madame Hirsute, the Bearded Lady. Without a word to me, they stroll out to a grassy spot and hold a conference. While I was wondering what it was all about, C. Reginald Smythe came up and joined me on the ballstand.

"Listen," I says, "how did them stone-heads get hold of that library? They have the same book that you showed me some days ago, ain't they? Do you happen to know what has caused the outbreak of high art and litterture?"

"Why, yes," he smiles. "You see, Doc, I chanced to show the book to Abe McGill, and he read it and told me that it woke him up, just as it did me. Then Abe told the others and they all sent for a copy."

"Not so good," I remarks. "It's liable to put fool ideas into what passes for their heads, and there will be Sheol to pay."

"I think it has already," replies Smythe. "Some told me this morning that they are going to quit the show and enter some big profession."

"That's a laugh in any langwidge," I

says. "If them babies quit trouping they'd be on the county, over the hills to the poorhouse. Why——"

Another tap on the shoulder interrupts me. Looking around, I behold no less than Baby Bessie, the One-Ton Girl.

"Well," I asks, "what have you got in the line of grief?"

"I am gointa, now, leave this show soon," she says. "I am tired of throwing my life away, sitting on the platform and letting a flock of skinny old hens give me the merry giggle."

"Oh, have you caught the new fever, too?" I asks. "What's your new racket going to be, flying across the Atlantic on the back of a eagle?"

"I have decided to take up expressionistic dancing," she titters.

"Well," I says, "if a elephant can do it, there ain't no reason why you can't succeed. Where are you going to park all that fat you got on, hey?"

"I can reduce, can't I? The book says——"

"I'd rather not hear any more about it," I cuts her off.

"See if I care!" she snaps, and beats it into the tent.

"That damn book must be hot stuff," I says to Smythe. "I didn't think even a earthquake could wake them chumps up."

"You ought to study it yourself," grins he. "For all you know, you may have some latent powers in your make-up that you don't know anything about. Why, just think, you might have the makings of a king in you!"

"Don't give me the grins," I says. "I bet there's a joke in that book some place, and I am going to find it out."

To make a clean bosom of matters, I did!

JUST as the show closed that night, Chief Rain-In-the-Pan, a full-blooded Mohawk named Pete Sullivan, came up to me and announced his retirement from the show business.

"I suppose," I sneers, "that you have read a little green bound book, called 'Why Be a Failure?' and it's got you all hopped up. Well, what have you decided to be, successor to Mussolini or heavyweight champ of the world?"

"Nothing so crude," says the chief. "You know, Doc, that I am one of the best

talkers in front of a bead joint in show business. I ain't never seen no other gil that could even touch me when it come to lecturing on Injun lore and selling Injun trinkets. So I have decided to make a lecture tour of the United States and Canada, telling of my experiences among the various tribes."

"You and Buffalo Bill, hey? And speaking of tribes, you know as much about tribes as I do about outboxing Gene Tunney. If wearing gloves at night softens the hands, you must sleep with your hat on. Forget it and stick to show business!"

"Forget nothing!" yelps the chief. "I am gonna check out of this sucker's game, and pronto!"

I leave him raving and walk down the lot. Outside of the big top, I meet my old friend, Henry Harrison Howe.

"Well, kid," I says, "how's things coming?"

"Very pleasant, indeed," he drawls. "I am indeed grateful to you for your aid in getting me the position. You see, I have plenty of time to read and study."

"Good," says I. "Horse-Collars Hawkins told me only the other day that you was the best ticket taker he ever seen. That's praise from Cæsar."

"I'm charmed to hear it," he says, and that was that.

As I hiked back toward the kid-show a thought dawned on me and socked me between the eyes. I began to wonder if a book like "Why Be a Failure?" could arouse a bunch of sideshow freaks, why couldn't it wake up Henry Harrison Howe?

He had plenty education, large gobs of culture and refinement. All he needed was some shot of dope to wake him up. What he needed was a whole slew of pep!

The next day three more freaks came up to me and announced that that they was leaving the show in the fast approaching future. One said he was going to be a doctor, one a lawyer, and the other broke down and admitted that he always knew he could be a good senator. I told them all to go to a naughty word, and then hunted up C. Reginald Smythe.

"Hey, listen!" I snaps. "What in the Hades sort of whoop-la is in that book, anyways? It's got this show all cockeyed, and hopped up everybody but the stuffed mummy in the glass case. If it works like that, I want to buy a copy for the guy who's taking tickets over at the big top. If it wakes him up like it has the rest, he should go over like Niagara Falls—big."

"I thought it was time you took a look at it," enthuses Smythe. "Here—I'll make you a present of my own copy, I know it all by heart. Read it several times, and I bet it wakes you up the same as it did everyone else."

I grabbed the book, sat on the bally-stand and prepared to give it the onceover. I turned to the first page and—*o sole mio!* Here, good people, take a look for yourselves:

WHY BE A FAILURE?

By Henry Harrison Howe

Woof!





LARRIMORE *of* LONESOME

A Moving Western Story of a Long Rider

By ANTHONY M. RUD

JUST north and east of the cedar breaks, where Lonesome Creek tumbles out of the Toi-Yabe Mountains, is cow range now considered worth fencing. In the older days of dogies and open range round-ups, it was just a nuisance. The hard driven waddies hated it. But even today no one is likely to hit Old Seth Saltus of the OXO for a line riding job on the twenty odd miles of Lonesome—unless he has a reason of a peculiar sort.

Jim Larrimore drifted in one morning shortly after daybreak, on a fresh horse. That meant he could not have come directly from Lewistown, Lamar or Brent; that he must have made camp somewhere almost in sight of the home ranch of the OXO.

This big spread was known through three counties for its unquestioning hospitality. Old Seth Saltus still was his own foreman and manager, though his stringy goatee had gone pure white. He ran the big, rambling ranch-house in the same open handed Nevada fashion he had used when his only neighbors were lazy, beef killing

Shoshones, and the infrequent sight of another white man meant a barbecue and a celebration of the sort that Seth jovially termed "Little Christmas."

So the eight home ranch punchers greeted this tall, hard featured stranger, Jim Larrimore, with cordiality but a certain reserve. Perhaps one or two of the original eight had uneasy forebodings concerning the visit of a sheriff; a law officer after one man, but not averse to herding a second, to Lewistown or Lamar. The OXO sprawled across the dividing line of two counties.

The stranger was quiet, courteous and seemingly at ease. His eyes, set wide and flanking a long nose, were hazel in color, with fine flecks of warmth in them. Not killer's eyes—according to tradition, at least.

His mouth was not given to smiling, and the rather long upper lip showed twin, divergent bulges of muscle from much pressing downward. Just short of six feet in height, with corded hands and wrists, and shoulders broad and square, sugges-

tive of smashing power, he was judged unanimously to be without a single taint of "pilgrim"—a man on whom it would be safe and sane to reserve judgment.

That morning Jim Larrimore went to Seth Saltus and gave his name.

"I aim to work for you," he said quietly. "I'll make the grade."

The veteran rancher's faded blue eyes turned upon him, took him in slowly from head to foot. They missed not a detail of the half-worn boots, the expensive looking spurs with filed down rowels little more than blunted knobs, the brand new Levi Strauses, the serviceable flannel shirt of O. D., the leather lined and open corduroy vest, the blue cotton bandanna, the battered Solarmon Stetson.

"Want to work for me?" mused Old Seth aloud. He knew at once this was no ordinary grubliner. "Yeah, go on. For how long d'you want to work for me?"

He watched the hazel eyes of the newcomer with genuine if concealed interest.

"Permanent—if you'll give me the line shack on Lonesome!"

"Eh?" Old Seth was frankly astonished. He had experienced years of real grief in making his hands take their turns at that God-forsaken spot. He even had put in a ninety dollar radio set, its aeriels aimed sidewise at San Francisco and Denver, so the evenings would be more bearable to each of the men on his month long turn. And here was a competent looking stranger asking for the detested job as a permanent proposition!

Jim Larrimore nodded briefly.

"You see, I've got a woman—and enough jack to set up fairly comfortable. Not squat, you understand!" he added.

"You couldn't; I own those sections," retorted Old Seth dryly. He peered at the man. The hazel eyes held steady with the eyes of faded blue.

"O. K.," growled the ranch owner shortly. "It ain't usual, but I reckon I can stand it. Sixty a month. You got a boss? . . . Yeah. Well, ride out any time you're ready. Tell Shorty to come back. He's been aching to get over on the old Dizzy Z, nearer to town. He can leave an extra bronc and what you need. You know the way, I reckon?"

"Yes."

Seth Saltus turned away without another word. The seemed lines of his face

had deepened. He too had brought a woman into this almost unknown cattle range of Nevada, freeing her from the double house of a Mormon elder in the Tooele Valley of Utah, on his way west. Fifty-one years before . . .

An hour later Jim Larrimore unexpectedly showed up at the ranch-house. He had donned shotgun chaps, and was ready now for the ride and the job; but his manner was hesitating.

"I thought maybe you'd like to know, boss," he said in an embarrassed way. "You were mighty square." He brought out a folded document. "This is my wife I'm bringing to Lonesome. I—I'd rather not show this paper to you, 'less you say. Our names ain't just the same—now. But it's us. This is her marriage certificate."

Seth Saltus nodded slowly.

"I'm right glad you told me, Jim," he said, making no move toward the proffered document. And then after a pause, bruskiy, "Get the hell outa here and on your job, cowboy!"

For the first time in weeks the broad, straight lips of Jim Larrimore curved at the corners, as he turned away; but the warming color of the red-brown flecks in his hazel eyes persisted long after his lips had ceased to twist upward. He had met a man he really liked.

Back in the ranch-house an old-timer smiled wearily through the pain in his eyes. There had been no chance for him to marry the girl he had brought to this pioneer country, the girl he had loved with all his rough, youthful body, mind and soul . . .

AFTER five years, Nevada cowboys still talk about what happened out there on Lonesome. It's as much on account of Stella as of Jim, you might say. Stella was sweet faced, wistful, slender and blonde; the prettiest woman who ever came into Nevada, maybe. Full breasted, but only a couple of hands' squeeze around the waist. Soft seeming, but able to hold up her end and fight back with wildcats for her man or her babies! If you know her kind you're lucky.

Jim had a certain amount of money, plenty for what he wanted to do. He brought out four Mex laborers and a consumptive white carpenter, from Lamar. He tore down the decrepit line shack on

Lonesome, and built him a solid cabin of cottonwood logs, planed boards, and mail order composition roofing. He reset the radio wire. He dragged out a piano all the way from Denver, and had a man come along on the train to tune it up and make it play roll music when you just shoved down on the foot pedals. He brought in loads of flour, sugar and canned goods . . .

As the weeks passed, it was plain that Old Seth was pleased enough with his new line rider on Lonesome. He even rode out once to visit. That day he must have had a good time, for he raised Jim's wages from sixty to sixty-five—not bad for a man who got his horses, his shelter and his grub all besides.

I went out there once, too. Mrs. Jim was nice; in fact I fell in love with her so solidly I never went back that way again. I liked Jim Larrimore. I still draw wages from him. Me? Oh, never mind me. I came west at nineteen, with three months to live. I'm now forty-one.

There was one tough egg from our outfit who wasn't bothered quite the same way, though. That was Butch Neissen. He was supposed to be over in the Minyan Range, most of the time; but unfortunately he'd glimpsed the blonde Mrs. Jim the one time she'd come to the OXO—that being the time Jim Larrimore had caught a hell of a cold, being out all night in the sleet and rain, and him tired.

Jim got well again in a week or so, of course. But Mrs. Jim—we call her Stella, now—rode seventeen miles each way, and carried back about eighteen bottles of medicine, just in case. She was afraid of pneumonia. She had a Mex-Shoshone squaw caring for Jim while she rode so fast two horses foundered.

Butch Neissen saw her then. A couple or three days later he rode out to Lonesome—and found Jim at the shack. A week later he went again, and found Stella alone. That was what he wanted, or thought he wanted.

But next morning Jim was there, firing his six-shooter to wake us up. Dawn was just breaking.

"I'm ready to surrender to the sheriff—and I hope this coyote *dies!*" said Jim, bleak but uncompromising. "I shot him with my .22 rabbit gun."

Well, right away most of the men guessed he was lying. He wouldn't tell

why he'd shot Butch. But every man who'd even laid eyes on Stella could make a pretty fair guess. Butch had been thirty miles from the job he'd been supposed to hold down, in the Minyans. No puncher like Jim, who wore a Colt's .45 all the time like it was part of his body, ever would grab a .22 Stevens single shot rabbit gun to do in a man!

A whole lot of men guessed that thing; but after some real grilling they got just that obstinate story out of Jim. He'd ridden in to say that he was ready to surrender to the sheriff and "expiate his crime."

The gang just laughed at him; but I reckon they respected him even more. It wasn't birdshot, but a .22 long rifle bullet that had penetrated Butch's lung.

And a couple of days after Jim had ridden back, expecting the sheriff on his tail, Butch got feverish and gabby. He told enough of the story to salt his hash—with Nevada men, anyway. He'd sneaked up to the line cabin, caught Stella while she sewed on something or other. I suppose he figured he had a broken spirited dance-hall girl of the old days, or someone like that.

The more damn fool him! Stella socked him on the nose, broke away, and then grabbed the little rabbit rifle.

She shot, only half getting a chance to aim; but the thin, long rifle bullet barged into the top of his right lung and brought him down. When the fever got him he told what everyone had suspected. Old Seth put a guard near, cussing like he hadn't for years. Then, when Butch had been coddled pretty near back to normal, Seth sent him on his way. He went, nervous and in a hurry, for he knew what would happen to him if he met any of the boys away from headquarters. We never saw him again.

IT WAS not long after this that Kewpie Reardon came out to spend three hours at the OXO—Kewpie Reardon being our U. S. marshal.

Kewpie, a little baldheaded jigger all the men liked, had ridden forty miles and more just to have a session of penny-and-nickel two-handed stud with Old Seth. They'd done it once every few months, I reckon, since the Toi-Yabe Mountains were toadstools; and either one of the old men

got more kick out of winning a dollar from the other, than one hundred times the velvet would have pleased him in an ordinary town game.

This afternoon when the marshal rode in, it just happened that Jim Larrimore made an extra trip to the home ranch, to replace some supplies the pack rats had ruined: flour, sugar, and such like. While he was gone, a-course, Stella rode line for Jim.

"Howdy, cowboy!" greeted Kewpie Reardon with a wide grin, riding up to turn his cayuse into the ranch-house corral.

Jim Larrimore looked up from the latigo he was diamond-hitching, and his fingers froze. I don't suppose he knew much about officers' badges in those days.

"Howdy, sheriff," he said at last, kind of wearily.

"Not shurff. Deppity Marshal Reardon. Call me Kewpie Reardon mostly . . . Don' know as I've shook hands with you afore . . . Yore handle?" He grinned the question and proffered a clasp; which Jim accepted almost too suddenly.

"Larrimore—Jim Larrimore is mine. Riding line for the OXO."

"O-ho. Damn good boss, Old Seth. Going in to wait till he gets back. Best o' luck, cowboy!" And Kewpie waved his hand.

That was all, right then. But when the marshal had turned his horse into the corral and hung up his saddle on the rack, he was not grinning any longer. As he walked to the house to wait for Old Seth, Kewpie turned to gaze after Jim Larrimore. Jim was jogging in easy fashion out toward the west gate, leading a pack horse.

"Damned if I know!" said the marshal under his breath.

IT WAS evident all through that evening, for the two hours that Kewpie played stud with Seth, that the marshal had something peculiar on his mind. Or it might have been something not *quite* on his mind, though trying to win back a place in the convolutions of his brain.

Kewpie, whose poker game would measure well against that of any straight professional, once bet twenty-five cents straight into a stud poker "lock" which the veriest novice should have seen and evaluated.

Old Seth snorted his disgust. He raised

twenty-five cents more—the limit after the last card—and then snapped his hole card face up.

"Hell's bells! You gettin' feeble minded—or what?" he demanded. "Don't try to call me, you consarned idiot! Don't you see I got three aces showin'? Another ace in the hole, dammit! All you got is deuces showin'."

The marshal grinned; but quickly that good-humored expression faded.

"I was thinking of somep'n else," Kewpie admitted frankly. "Nemmind this game; I got a bigger one, mebbe. Tell me one thing. Who's this here new man of yours, this Jim—this big fella. Lat-timer—Lorimer . . ."

"Larrimore—Jim Larrimore," corrected Old Seth, his faded blue eyes suddenly veiling. He centered a basilisk gaze upon the noncommittal officer. "I sure hope he—he ain't done nothing?" Seth Saltus was asking, now. He did not know the man as well as he would have liked to know him.

"I don't know whether he's really done somep'n, or ain't," admitted Kewpie frankly. "His face kind of sticks in my mind. I've looked at him somewheres before, though. And that ain't first chop medicine in *my* business—like you know. Where does this hombre hang out now? And where did he come from?"

As well as he could, Old Seth told his friend. After all, there was not much even he could say about Jim Larrimore and the lovely wife he had brought to Lonesome.

"But if there's any trouble, you'll let me know—first?" queried Old Seth. "I—I'd back that boy, less'n he'd . . . Oh you know. There were *some* things that'd turn the stomach of even vigilantes."

"Sure as hell, old friend. I'll see—and tell you first-off. I dunno. I c'd almost swear there's a post office reward on your Jim. You know what that sort of thing means!"

"Yeah, I do," nodded Old Seth, his eyes glazing queerly. Probably one of those fool notions an old man is apt to get—particularly if he is lonely—was just about to be smashed to fragments. Seth sat there, gazing.

Back in Lewistown late that night, Kewpie Reardon methodically saw to his horse, ate a tasteless meal at the counter of the

Chinese restaurant, then climbed the stairs to his own one room headquarters above the post office. Up there he lit the one small kerosene lamp, lifted it, and carried it on a peering round of inspection.

The walls of the chamber were thumb-tacked with reward posters issued by the Federal Government. None of the posters was more than five years old; Kewpie and his confrères in the Secret Service had seen to that. Two of the posters were black crayoned, "*Probable Suicide.*"

Several more probably would earn this notation; it is about the only escape for a malefactor when the United States Government seriously gets in pursuit. Most bandits know this—or learn it at San Quentin.

There in his one room office, Kewpie Reardon suddenly stopped. His lamp was high. He stifled a heartfelt curse. It *had* to be this way! He read half of a small handbill, showing the features of a man very roughly, and describing him in small print. Five thousand dollars dead or alive! Another thousand from the post office . . .

After six hours of sleep Kewpie saddled up and rode out again to the OXO.

THE next noon Kewpie and Old Seth—the latter reluctantly convinced by a cursory look at the printed description—rode toward Lonesome. They surprised Jim Larrimore—Halas, as he was called in the printed bill—by stepping out of an alder thicket which adjoined the potato patch on which he was working.

Jim Larrimore had no chance. The marshal held a leveled Winchester. Jim looked, shrugged his shoulders and surrendered.

"I reckon you've got me, Mister Sheriff," he admitted with half apathetic sarcasm lost upon the visitors.

"I'm sorry for you, Halas. But I've got to do my duty," said Kewpie softly. But there was no smile upon his face. Couching the rifle at his hip he reached around, unsnapped something that jingled, and tossed a pair of open handcuffs at the feet of the prisoner.

"Put 'em on!" he commanded in a quiet voice.

"Jim! What'n hell's this all about?"

The voice of Old Seth quivered as it split the instant of quiet.

Halas, he who had called himself Jim Larrimore, did not answer at once. His chin had sunk to his chest. Slowly he let down his arms, and reached for the shiny new manacles; reached blindly, missed them, finally got them and put them on his splendid wrists. His shoulders had slumped from the squareness of their line.

"Oh it's bad enough, boss. I'm not arguin'," said Halas. "I guess you know the details pretty well, Mister Reardon?"

"I don't think we have to talk much about it."

"Hell!" swore the ranchman, still almost unbelieving in spite of the testimony of his ears.

At that moment, however, a girl burst from the shack. She had seen the marshal's leveled rifle and had guessed instantly what it signified.

"Oh not that!" she cried frantically. "You can't do that!"

Of a sudden, as though realizing the meaning of the tableau to the full, she stumbled and stopped, knee deep in the potato vines. Her hands raised to grasp her blonde locks, blown over her forehead. Then she tried to gesture imploringly to Halas, but her knees gave way. With a gasping sigh she crumpled into the weeded furrow.

"Stella!" cried Halas, almost forgetting his own predicament as he started toward her.

The marshal barred the way, the octagonal rifle barrel poking straight into the breastbone of the prisoner.

"Wait!" he commanded briefly, finger on the trigger of the Winchester. "Seth, you take care of her—and do a good job of it, d'you hear?"

"Me? The hell I will!" growled the old man savagely.

"I deputize you right here and now. Take care of that woman!" Every vestige of friendliness had gone from the voice of the little marshal. And he did not even wait to see whether or not his command was obeyed. "Turn around and march!" he commanded in a brusque voice. "I'm borrowing your hoss, Seth Saltus, for the use of my prisoner!" he jerked back over his shoulder. "I'll send him back soon."

Marshal and prisoner jogged their mounts over the rough trail which skirted the cedar breaks. Kewpie Reardon had no intention of returning to the OXO, but

would head direct for Lewistown, riding all night. It was his policy to avoid trouble when bringing in a man; and there was no telling but that some sentimental cowboy at the home ranch might think it his duty to help in a getaway.

"You sure played hell in grabbing yoreself a woman, damn you, running from the law," observed Reardon caustically, after two miles had passed in silence. "Why for the love o' the Seven Sacred Side-winders'd you *do* it?"

Halas raised a pain filled countenance; a blur of hopelessness hid the flecks of color in the irises of his eyes.

"I had to," he said dully.

"Hrrmph!" snorted the marshal in disgust. He had little patience with a criminal who would drag a woman deep into the slime with him. But Halas was a puzzling sort, anyway. He looked decent, even if hard-bitten, and he certainly was industrious. Seth Saltus had approved of him.

Just that second Reardon glimpsed something which made his jaws clamp tight, and his hand reach swiftly for the Winchester carbine slung under his saddle fender. Three hundred yards ahead a lone horseman had rounded an elbow of the rocky trail.

There was nothing especially remarkable in that. The actions of the stranger, however, were decidedly suspicious. So swiftly that the apathetic prisoner failed completely to see him in the gathering dusk, the oncoming man leaned forward and neck reined his mount, raking it with his spurs. The startled horse jumped six feet sidewise, and clattered out of sight down a boulder strewn dry wash which led obliquely toward the banks of Lonesome.

The noise of shod hoofs in this region served to make Halas straighten up and stare; but the trail ahead now was deserted, and shadows from the peaks of the Toi-Yabes were lengthening over it. Halas said nothing.

"I got this gun aimed right at yore gizzard!" warned Reardon in a loud, savage tone. "Yore friend mebbe can get me; if he does you'll go to hell, instead of prison, with me still in charge! S'pose you yell and tell him so!"

Halas shook his head.

"What do I care?" he muttered.

Of a sudden, however, the apathetic ex-

pression vanished from his countenance, and his eyes widened in a bewildered, unbelieving stare. From the dry wash rose the hatless, frowzy head of the horseman who had sought concealment. And the newcomer peered up at Halas and the marshal, an understanding grin of sneering, cruel triumph upon his features.

Unconsciously Halas threw himself back against the saddle cantle, in spite of wrists manacled to the saddle horn managing to stop the well trained cow pony.

"Great God in Heaven!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"Keep a-going!" snapped the marshal, at the same time jabbing the horse ahead with the barrel of his carbine. Seth's blood bay leapt forward with his strange acting burden, and for several minutes threatened to outgallop the officer's mount. They left the skulking horseman far behind.

But after a time Reardon ranged alongside, leaning over and yanking back on the bridle of the bay.

"Hold up now!" he yelled. "I reckon he ain't going to follow us."

The eyes of Halas were shining, every vestige of apathy vanished.

"What the devil is it you're arresting me for?" he cried in what sounded like passionate, overpowering relief.

"Huh?" Reardon grunted, and stared.

The words poured from Halas now. He pleaded insistently. He was innocent—and all along he had fled, believing himself guilty! Surely, under the circumstances they were not going to take him away to jail, with his wife Stella thus left alone and unprotected? Of course not!

"Wife?" echoed the marshal. He had not thought that—though it did not much matter.

But again and again Halas reiterated his assertions. He was innocent of any major crime, and the man back there they had passed on the trail could prove it!

"How in hell can he prove it?"

"Just by being there at all!" was the astounding response.

"Eh? What? You gone plumb loco?"

Halas shook his head impatiently.

"No, can't you see? That was Joe Halas, my half-brother—the man I thought I'd murdered!"

For several minutes the marshal sat his horse and stared. In spite of the wildness

of this fragmentary story, it came to him as a growing hunch that the whole fool thing was true; that he had been about to jail an entirely innocent man. But he was constitutionally hard to convince—particularly so in the case of a prisoner who once had openly admitted his guilt.

"Shucks!" said Reardon, pulling the folded reward notice from the pocket of his shirt. "So you s'posed you killed a mail clerk, huh? Well, mebbe you did; but I didn't hear about any of 'em getting hurt—except one got busted ear drums when you stick-ups blowed in the mail car door."

He scanned the paper, but by now the light had faded till he could not read the fine print. He gestured impatiently.

"Oh hell, we can thrash this out in town," he concluded. "Plenty time."

"Oh, but there ain't!" denied Halas, a sudden ferocity in his voice. "That coyote once was after my wife. He's come *back*, don't you see? He'll surprise 'em, and . . ." His voice choked off in apprehension and anger.

Then, although Kewpie Reardon still did not believe, he yielded a point to his lifelong reverence of women.

"Huh, we'll see. You stay put." He swung down from his mount, trailing the reins. Laying one heavy revolver on a flat rock where it would be handy, he crumpled a scrap of paper from his pocket, gathered a few twigs of dried aspen and mesquite and scratched a match. A moment later a tiny, clear flame licked up, sufficient for him to read the reward poster.

"Huh," he commented. "They're askin' for J. Halas—mail robbery on the S. P. That's you, ain't it?"

"It's my half-brother Joe. It must be, though I didn't know about any robbery." The prisoner's voice was controlled now, though his breath came audibly.

"Hm. 'Six feet one; black hair; blue eyes; weight one-seventy-five; disposition surly . . .' Hell, fella, that fits you like a glove!"

"Wait a second!" cried Halas sharply. "It fits Joe, too. Doesn't it say anything more? There's two-three ways we ain't alike! How about a birthmark on his left shoulder?"

"Nope, don't mention it. It just says, 'Index and middle finger missing from left hand; one conviction for——'"

A cry of triumph interrupted. Halas spread his hands and held them toward the light. All his fingers were intact!

"Well, I'll be damned!" This was more than a reasonable doubt, and the marshal recognized it. "Light down and tell me the whole of it," he bade, unlocking the manacles.

Then and there by the tiny blaze, Jim Halas rapidly poured forth the story of a gangster half-brother; of a girl they both had courted according to their fashion; of a quarrel and shooting fray interrupting the gangster's bulldozing and manhandling of the frightened girl.

Jim had left the other unconscious on the ground—dead, he believed. Bluffing his way past three of the gang, who would swear away his life as a matter of course if the case came to trial, Jim escaped with Stella. Married under their right names, they immediately changed to Larrimore.

"Hm," commented the marshal grimly. "If that ain't the truth it sounds mighty much like it. S'pose we go riding back, Big Boy. Here's a gun and a few ca'tridges!"

AS THEY pounded back over the rocky trail, a huge yellow moon floated up over the foothills to eastward, allowing a reckless pace. But they had given the other man too much of a lead; they did not overtake him. For a moment the marshal questioned whether or not the quarry might not have turned off; yet he dismissed the thought. There was no branching trail until they reached the line cabin, the line of wire of the OXO.

Faint and flattened by distance then came three ominous sounds, audible to their strained senses even above the clatter of hoofs. Revolver fire!

Crack! Crack, crack! Three shots, then silence.

"Old Seth!" yelled Halas. "He's . . ."

But there was no time for comment. Dashing around the last bend of Lonesome, past the pole corral, Halas—mounted on the better horse—was far in the lead. The marshal shouted stern admonition, but it went unheeded. What cared Halas for taking this other man alive?

The cabin came in sight, its front window lighted. Halas leapt from the saddle and sprinted. From within the cabin sounded a muffled revolver shot; then a

woman's scream of terror and despair.

Hurdling a crumpled body he half realized to be that of Old Seth, Halas plunged head foremost at the latched door. His shoulder splintered away the wooden bar and he lurched inward, almost losing balance.

In there was his half-brother, fatter and more ugly of countenance than ever. With a curse the later hurled Stella straight at Jim, and grabbed for his six-shooter.

Unfortunately for him, however, the invader stepped upon the pearl handled weapon he just had wrested from the girl, and his heel slipped. The split second settled him.

Thrusting Stella aside with one sweep of his arm, Jim was upon the half-brother in two bounds. The latter's six-gun roared; but the bullet, slightly deflected from its aim at his heart, only burned through Jim's shirt, searing the skin of his left armpit.

The two heavy bodies crashed together, and it was the bandit's which gave way backward. With a resounding smash which well nigh knocked down the center partition of the cabin, his back, neck and shoulders hit the wall. Jim, a thrashing, pummeling fury, paid no attention to the other man's weapon, but with smashing, bone-crushing blows reduced him to helplessness.

He did not know that within five seconds the fingers of Joe Halas went limp, releasing the six-gun he had tried in vain to raise and use again upon this vengeful, tigerish adversary. He did not know or care that his hated opponent was struggling no longer; that as he throttled Joe and banged his head against the puncheon floor, the latter's eyes turned slowly upward in unconsciousness.

But Kewpie Reardon, running in all ready to fire if necessary, saw and quickly understood. He tried to pull Jim off his victim. It was impossible. With one well judged blow with the barrel of his Colt's he dazed the half-insane husband, then threw him back and out of the way. He slipped the manacles on the wrist of the other man, bound his ankles with a pigging string taken from his belt, and then straightened up.

"Take care of yore man; he won't have no worse'n a headache," he said gruffly to the frightened girl, who had darted to Jim

Halas. "This other hombre's my prisoner. And I reckon I got real trouble waiting for me outside."

With that he strode out of the door.

"Did you get him?" demanded a weak voice. Old Seth, groggy on hands and knees, was trying to drag himself to the scene of conflict.

"Damn right!"

Old Seth relaxed with a sigh in the arms of his friend.

JIM came to himself still fighting; but between Stella and Kewpie Reardon he was soon quieted. One long look at the wreck he had made of his kinsman also helped to quell the fury in him.

Joe Halas, blinking hatred from one swollen eye—the other was completely closed—tremblingly raised a hand upon which there were only three fingers.

"I'll come back! I'll git yuh, damn yore lousy souls!" he whispered. The mutilated hand clenched, then fell back.

The marshal held Jim's arm in a grip of steel.

"I wouldn't worry none about that," he advised dryly. "When this jigger gets loose from the law this time, he'll be crowding a hundred fifty years of age, I figger. Kinda old to go killing or courtin' . . ."

Old Seth had stopped two bullets, but they did not incapacitate him long. Five days later Kewpie Reardon thought it safe to leave, with his bunged-up prisoner. Expedient, too. For with only half the story reluctantly narrated to them by Jim, who had ridden for supplies and a doctor, the waddies of the OXO, intensely loyal both to their employer and the blonde haired queen of the Lonesome, were all for tendering Joe Halas the same treatment they had been prevented from giving Butch Neissen.

But the wily marshal made it away safely, and delivered his prisoner in Lewistown, much to the punchers' disgust.

When Old Seth could sit up, he commanded Jim to get back on the job of riding line. And every moment when his shrewd brain could devise some excuse, Seth had Stella in the room with him, asking her diffident questions, learning the whole straight-forward tale of her love for Jim, and the life they had led. Perhaps her woman's intuition served her well,

for she treated this strange old man with as sweet consideration as if he had been a grown son of her own.

One dusk, just after Jim had washed up for supper and come in with a grin and a happy word—Old Seth had a word to say. It came hard, too, for he had sweated over the way he could say it, not to offend these two whom he loved.

"I reckon I'm getting along, Jim," he said with queer diffidence. "Mebbe I sort of need a foreman over to the spread. D'you s'pose—uh—do you s'pose you'd stay?"

"A-course," he temporized, "I know you've been making a home outa this.

But we'd set you up a real fine shack over near Meecham Spring, if you liked that, half again as big as this.

"That is—uh—unless you two'd figger you'd like to come up and live with me to the ranch-house. It's kind of lonely there . . ."

Jim's eyes were shining. The harsh lines had left his face in a smile of sympathy if not of complete understanding. He reached out one hand for a wan fist on the coverlet. And he saw the tears starting in the blue eyes of Stella Halas.

"You tell him, Stella! *You* tell him!" the cowboy grinned, and winked broadly at Old Seth as he left the room.





*A Tale of North-
Woods Partnership* 

BUTTER

By JOHN BEAMES

WHAT the deuce come of the butter?" grumbled Ross Galway in a loud voice.

"What do you want of butter?" evaded Pape. "You're always hollerin' for luxuries."

"See here, I wasn't raised on the windy side of no spruce tree, an' brung up on bannock an' whitefish the way you was," retorted Galway. "Where I come from there was ten good cows milked night an' mornin', an' you could eat a pound of butter a day if you wanted an' nothin' said."

"An' whoever asked you to come off of the farm?" inquired Pape, glad to lead the subject astray. "Nursin' cows an' spoon-feedin' little pigs is just what you was made for. This here country ain't made for no hicks nor hayseeds."

"What I'm askin' you," said Galway stubbornly and not to be diverted, "is what come of that butter? This here crock was a quarter full last week, an' I know dern well I didn't eat it all. Did you hog it?"

"I never ate none of the dern cow grease," retorted Pape. "What's a feller

want with butter anyway, huh?" he added.

"What's a feller want with tobacco?" countered Galway. "They don't raise tobacco in the bush no more than they do butter."

"Tobacco's different," said Pape defensively.

"Not a particle," insisted Galway. "I don't use tobacco an' you don't use butter. Now, what you done with my butter?"

"Well, if you got to know," said Pape with extreme reluctance, "I needed some grease for my traps."

Galway was speechless for a moment.

"Usin' good butter to grease traps," he said at last in a strangled voice.

"Well, I had to make some use of the dern stuff," mumbled Pape. "Kickin' around here—salty—gettin' to stink some. Good way to use it up."

"That was good butter," said Galway passionately. "It wasn't no more salty nor stinkin' 'an what I am. It was some of the best butter I ever eat; it was wonderful butter. An' you go an' grease your damn dirty traps with it. Well, you know pretty near what I think of you, I guess."

He resolutely turned his back upon his partner and set about gathering up his traps, hatchet, pack and rifle. Fifteen minutes later, without a word of farewell, he stepped out into the snow and marched away.

Pape felt guilty. He did not understand the farm bred Galway's craving for butter, always a luxury in the North, but he saw that his partner was deeply hurt.

"Oh well, he'll get over it," he assured himself. "It ain't as if a man needs butter. He'll likely be better without it."

But the deprivation of his favorite food seemed permanently to affect Galway's nature. Usually cheerful and full of loud and sudden laughter, he grew moody and morose. His health seemed to suffer, and he said darkly at times that he doubted whether he would live to see the spring. He never referred directly to the butter again, but there grew up a reserve between them that was all the harder to bear in that they had no other company.

Pape felt that his partner was unreasonable. He had not used a great deal of butter on his traps, and the crock would soon have been empty in any event. But he remembered that he and Galway had undergone many hardships together, and that Galway had never failed him at a pinch. But his conscience troubled him, and he could not bear the look of reproach in his friend's eyes.

AND SO, instead of walking his trapline one day, he turned south at a rapid pace. The snow was not yet so deep as to make walking difficult, and upon the frozen lakes it had been packed quite hard by the wind.

His first real obstacle was Kitten River, a snarling gray beast, foaming between ice capped rocks. Kitten River is nowhere very deep but, when the temperature is below zero, it is dangerous for a man to get even a little wet.

At last he discovered a place where a fallen tree precariously bridged the main channel. He cut himself a balancing pole and skated delicately across on the rocking trunk. Later he encountered heavy going in a vast slough, where the snow lay soft and deep among the tall and matted reeds.

He camped for the night in the snow and slept fairly comfortably, for the tem-

perature fell no lower than ten or twelve degrees below zero. He was on his way again long before dawn.

All that day he tramped steadily southwards, through the forest and across frozen lakes until, a little before three in the afternoon, with the pale sun close to its setting, he left the forest behind and came to the plains, where the ragged fringe of pioneer settlement was beginning to establish itself.

Here he encountered a wood trail that led him, on the edge of twilight, to a small bush farm, a place of squat log buildings and crooked rail fences on the edge of a tiny field. But there was a smell of cows on the frosty air, and cows connote butter.

Four dogs announced loudly their intention of tearing him limb from limb, circling him with gleaming fangs until a man came up and chased them away.

"Come on in, stranger," he urged with Northern hospitality. "Glad to see you. The woman'll have supper right away. Hey, ma, here's a man an' he's hungry."

A woman with a worn and lined face gave him a gap toothed smile and a gnarled and bony hand.

"Set down, stranger," she said. "I'll have somethin' for you to eat pretty quick now."

The single room seemed to be full of children, sturdy and bright eyed, and they all stared portentously. But nobody asked any questions.

That is the etiquette of the North. You are asked no questions, but you are expected without delay to give your name, where you came from, and your reason for being where you are.

"My name's Frank Pape. Me an' my partner's trappin' north of Kitten River. I come down to get some butter," recited Pape.

His host nodded gravely. They would do business after the guest had eaten, which is also a rule of the north.

"My name's Mort White," he said. "That there's my woman." Pape nodded to Mrs. White. "And these here is my kids. This is Sally, an that's Rotherham an' Patsy an' Olivia an' Meenie, an' Joralda. Joralda's the baby. Ma thought that name up for her; she always was a good one on names."

He proceeded at great length to give the

tell names, ages, dispositions and capacities of all his offspring, as though he were describing so many colts, and Pape listened politely and made sympathetic clucking noises until supper was ready.

There were unlimited pork and potatoes and turnips, butter and bread and stewed black tea. Then some preserved blueberries were brought out, evidently in honor of the guest, for the children all squealed with joy.

"Shut that racket," roared White, "or I'll have the hides off of the whole bunch with a blacksnake! You act like a bunch of shoats in a trough. Where's your manners? Patsy, you put your spoon in that there dish again an' I'll have your liver out."

They grinned at him.

"Can't make 'em mind no way," apologized White. "But one of these days I will take an' trim one of 'em like my old dad used to trim me." There followed interminable and pointless reminiscences of childhood days.

After the meal Pape pulled out his pipe, knife and plug of tobacco. He noticed a hungry look in the eyes of his host and, when he had filled his own pipe, mutely proffered the plug and knife.

"Mister Pape," said White fervently, "you just saved my life. I ain't had a smoke for a month, not to say a chew. Kinne-kinnic an' tea leaves an' such all, but leave me tell you it's waste of time an' just a aggravation to a man."

"Well, can I have some butter?" inquired Pape.

Mrs. White looked doubtful.

"The way these kids eat butter it's a crime, so it is," she said. "An' with Beauty not comin' in until Febooary an' Lily goin' off the way she is. I'll give you a pound——"

"No, I want to buy it," said Pape. "I'll trade ratskins against your butter. I want ten pounds if you got it."

Mrs. White shook her head regretfully.

"Maybe Mockley's could."

"Where do they live?"

"Nine miles southwest," said White. "But I don't think they got more than one or two cows. My nearest other neighbors is Blythes, but they're about fourteen miles west."

"I come about seventy miles now," pleaded Pape, "an' I'd like to get back

tomorrow night. I wouldn't want to leave my traps no longer'n that."

Mrs. White looked from him to her children, pity struggling with maternal instinct.

"I'll give you a ratskin a pound," urged Pape.

"Tell you what," cut in White. "We'll give you five pounds of butter for three ratskins an' that plug of tobacco you got. The woman gets the pelts an' I get the tobacco. How about it?"

"I'd liefer give five pelts for the butter," said Pape.

White shook his head doggedly.

"The way I am now, I got no conscience when it comes to tobacco. If you was dyin' for a smoke an' I had just the one pipeful I'd leave you die."

"All right," said Pape with a rueful grin. "Let me cut off a little bit first."

Under White's jealous eye, he cut a corner off the plug and put it carefully away in a corner of his handkerchief. Mrs. White handed over a large pallid lump of butter, strongly impregnated with salt, in exchange for the three ratskins.

"Sure, you ain't goin' back tonight," they both said together. "What's your rush?"

"Got to be movin'," he replied. "I figure to be a good part of my way back before I camp."

"Well, come an' see us again when the cows is milkin'," they said hospitably. "We'll give you all the butter you want for nothin'."

THE night was cloudless and pale emerald wraiths of the aurora dimmed the hard glitter of the stars. The snow squeaked underfoot, but it was not cold—as a Northeasterner counts cold. Pape had traveled about fifteen miles of his homeward way before he lit a fire and rested for five hours.

By nightfall on the following day he was very tired. To cover a hundred and forty miles in three days is very good walking on the best of roads, but it is a superhuman task when it has to be done through yielding snow and over a rough country.

In his exhausted condition and the darkness he was afraid to attempt the crossing of the Kitten River on the unstable tree trunk, and spent the night on the south

shore. In the morning he crossed safely and hurried on.

"Good stuff," he exulted. "Old Ross'll be tickled. Wisht that dern White didn't have to have my last plug of tobacco. It's goin' to be pretty slim pickin's for me till I get some more. But, anyway, Ross was pretty white about that butter, an' it's a pretty poor guy that can't do somethin' for a friend. It'll be some surprise to him; he'll never think but what I just been out walkin' my line."

But a mile from home he had to cross a little boggy stream and ventured upon it confidently. A treacherous blow hole promptly let him through up to the waist.

He was so near the shanty that he did not trouble to light a fire and dry his wet clothes, but climbed out, swearing, and broke into a trot. Soon all his garments turned to solid ice and crackled as he moved. His teeth chattered and his legs filled with needlelike pains, followed by a deadly numbness.

He clattered up to the log hut, but the place was silent and deserted. No smoke came from the stovepipe and on the new rime before the door was no print of feet. He entered and the place was like a tomb; lacy curtains of white tracery hung in the corners and the whole ceiling was furred with frost crystals.

But he had no time for speculation or anxiety just then. With numb and fumbling fingers he lit the stove and opened the draft full. The little stove panted like a tired dog and red spots appeared and spread rapidly upon its round cheeks.

Pape vigorously attacked his armor of ice. By the time he had freed himself from it he discovered that the frost had nipped several toes and one heel. He put both feet in a basin of cold water to thaw out. Then he howled and kicked the basin across the room and began a grotesque kind of dance while tears of anguish coursed down his cheeks. Eventually he fell down upon his bunk in an exhausted condition, and for the rest of the day he greased his swollen and burning feet at intervals with the butter he had undergone so much to procure.

That afternoon a blizzard blew up and he could hear the wind shrieking in the trees around the shanty. The pain in his feet had lessened to the point where he

could spare a thought for Ross Galway.

Galway had one serious defect as a bushman: in stormy weather, with trails obliterated and landmarks distorted, he was very apt to lose his way. A landscape always takes on an unreal and fantastic appearance when a thirty mile gale is filling the air with whirling snow dust, and the most experienced man is sometimes deceived into thinking a quite familiar object strange and unknown. Galway was especially prone to this kind of confusion of mind.

PAPE fell asleep that night with a mind full of anxiety and awoke to hear the wind still raging.

Though his feet felt as though they had been boiled, he wrapped them up and eased them gently into his moccasins and hobbled out in search of his partner.

It was no longer snowing hard, but a cold wind blew with great force and in the gray atmosphere objects took on changing and indeterminate aspects.

"Just the very kind of a day he'd get himself snarled up worst in," fretted Pape. "God knows where he's headed for this minute! I'll try the bald hill over by the lake, but I don't guess I'll be able to see very far at that."

When he left the forest, the wind caused him to bow his head and brought water from his eyes, but he struggled on. He had almost to crouch on the top of the little hill to maintain his position, and below him and out across the lake fan shaped clouds of fallen snow, caught up by the wind, gyrated madly and opaquely.

From one of them there emerged suddenly a little figure, ploughing toilfully through the drifts in a general northerly direction.

"If that's Ross," mused Pape, "he sure has managed to get plenty lost. I'll bet he thinks he's headed for the shack right now. I better stop him before he gets to the North Pole."

He hobbled off on a course that would head the other off, and found that the man was indeed his partner.

"Hello, old-timer, where you goin'?" he inquired with a grin.

Galway scowled.

"Home, where the hell else would I be goin'?"

"Must've built you a new shack," com-

mented Pape. "The old one's back the other way. I come lookin' for you."

"The devil you did. Who asked you?"

But Pape's conscience was at rest; he was filled with brotherly affection for his partner, and he refused to be annoyed.

"Well, come on back now an' get some-
thin' to eat," he urged mildly.

"Huh. Who the hell wouldn't get lost in such a blizzard?" said Galway sulkily. "It's all right, you layin' snug under a roof; but when I woke up this mornin' I was buried right under, an' you couldn't see your own hand before your face for snow."

"Where you been all this long time?" asked Pape, as the weary man fell in behind him, treading in his tracks.

"I'll tell you when I get dern good an' ready," snarled Galway.

Pape was puzzled, but he wisely forebore to make any comment. In silence he led the way to the shanty; in silence he fried the moose steak and boiled the tea; in silence he brought out a large lump of pallid butter and set it on a tin plate. Galway sat hunched before the stove, head bowed in his hands, in an attitude of extreme fatigue.

"Come on an' eat," said Pape gently.

Galway lifted his head slowly and his eyes widened.

"Where'd you'd get that butter?" he asked in a tired drawl. "Been hidin' it out on me?"

Pape shook his head.

"No, sir. I took a notion to hike down to the settlement an' I thought I'd pick up a little butter while I was down there."

"The deuce you did." Galway's expression was curious. There was guilt and shame in it and at the same time a disposition towards laughter.

He stooped and rummaged in his pack, bringing out a cotton bag which he held up.

"Know where I been the last five days?"

"I'm kinder commencin' to guess," answered Pape with a wry smile.

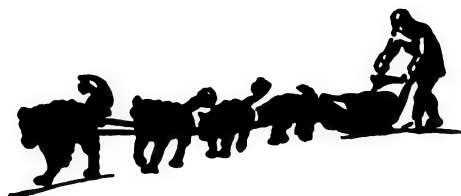
"Uh-huh. There's ten pounds of butter in this. Got it at a Swede settlement down south of Mink Lake. Some job gettin' back. Near drowned in the damn lake—rotten ice—an' got lost in that blizzard comin' back. Say, how're you fixed for tobacco?"

"All out," answered Pape somberly, thinking how he had sacrificed his last plug for the butter which now proved unnecessary.

Galway tossed a small parcel on the table.

"Well, they got a little store down there," he said, "so I got some tobacco, too."

Pape picked the pillow out of his bunk and flung it at him. Galway jumped up and grabbed him, and they hauled each other around the shack and thumped each other on the back until they had overcome their emotions and could look at each other and laugh without tears in their eyes.



The Tense Conclusion
of

SECRET OPERATIVE K-13

*A Remarkable Novel of War and the
Fate of a British Spy and a Yankee
Ace in the Rear of the German Armies*

By
JOEL ROGERS

Preceding Events Briefly Retold

A solitary British airplane swooped down out of the sky, straight at the château of Oldmonde, in southeastern Belgium, where General von Schmee presided over headquarters of the Seventh Corps of the Second German Field Army. The flyer was a German spy, and he was bringing military information that might mean the capture of Paris. Colonel von Kleinhals, the Chief of Communications, accompanied by his aide, Lieutenant von Reuter of the Prussian Guards, and the snooping orderly, Sergeant Wolf, met the plane as it landed. Von Kleinhals received the secret papers from the pilot and also the surprising and ominous news that K-13, the great English spy, was known to have penetrated to Oldmonde itself. Von Reuter returned hurriedly to the château to inform General von Schmee. Following him, on the spy's departure, Von Kleinhals and Wolf were attacked from behind in a grove of trees and the secret papers stolen. Von Schmee, familiarly known as "the Butcher," was apoplectic with rage at the prompt activity of the dreaded K-13. Instant measures were taken to apprehend him.

Far on the other side of the battle lines, Captain Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face, British flight commander, interviewed his foremost ace, Lieutenant Big Dick Fahnestock. Big Dick was an American of German stock, but his loyalty was unquestioned by his comrades of the Fighters. Captain Face told Big Dick that he had a momentous mission for him to perform. The great K-13 was in danger at Oldmonde, back of the

German lines, and the flyer must go to his rescue. He must pose as a deserter, a German spy, perhaps as Number Two of the enemy Intelligence, known to be working with the British Flying Force. Further, because no one knew who K-13 was, Big Dick must trust to luck and wits to discover the English spy at Oldmonde. Though disliking anything but a fighting job, Dick agreed. That night, with the connivance of the captain, Big Dick broke open the company safe, removed certain papers that would establish his position with the enemy, and flew his plane far into Hunland, to the château of Oldmonde.

Big Dick landed on the lawn of the château. He was immediately made prisoner and questioned by von Reuter. The young Prussian officer sneered at his claims of being a German sympathizer and accused him of being a spy. Raging, Big Dick was led into von Schmee's presence. Von Reuter took the papers the flyer had brought and decoded the message that accompanied them. There were duplicates of the important papers that had been stolen by K-13 that morning, and a betrayal of Big Dick. He had been sent as a decoy to protect Number Two of the German Intelligence, who was none other than Captain T. W. O. Face of the British Royal Flying Corps—Big Dick's commanding officer. And it was advised that the American flyer might be useful to von Schmee in locating K-13. Berserk at his betrayal, Big Dick was set upon by a host of sentries and arrested as a spy.



Shortly before the hour set for Big Dick's execution, von Kleinhals and his young aide, von Reuter, visited the prisoner in his cell. They could get no information from him regarding K-13 and soon departed. When he was alone again, Big Dick picked up a little metal object that had fallen from von Kleinhals' pocket. It was the key to his handcuffs! He quickly unlocked the manacles and ran to the small window of the cell. And there on the sill he found a note from K-13, warning him to be careful, that von Kleinhals was allowing him to escape, hoping he would lead the Germans to K-13.

At that moment Big Dick saw a comely peasant girl walking across the plot of ground beneath the guardhouse. He watched her flirt a moment with the sentry on duty there, and then suddenly swing an object at the soldier's head. And as the German crumpled silently, Big Dick forced his way through the window and sped in the wake of the girl. In the dark forest, when he had caught up with her, she whispered that she was K-13! She instructed Big Dick to hide himself in the near-by hayfield, in the sixth stack he came to, and to wait there. He ran on alone wily, and buried himself deep in the hay.

That same night, von Schmee slept uneasily. Once he seemed to feel a breath steal over him, and he jumped up from his bed and rushed into his office. He opened his great safe, and there, intact, lay the precious military papers received from Number Two. He examined them, and suddenly went white. He had given the wrong

orders last night. The weakness in the English lines was not at Hill 439, but at Laraine Wood! Quickly he called his staff together and announced the revised plans of battle. The colossal reserves of the German Army would be thrown against the few English regiments at Laraine Wood.

Through all the long hours of the next day regiment after regiment, the flower of the German Army, marched past Oldmonde on their way to storm Laraine Wood. And of all those who watched them pass by, only K-13 knew they were going to certain doom. For the night before, K-13 had stolen von Schmee's papers and substituted a forged set in their stead. And the English had concentrated men and guns at Laraine Wood, picked divisions, to blow the German hosts to hell.

And through that same day Big Dick lay concealed in his haystack waiting for K-13, while the bloodhounds searched relentlessly for him everywhere. And then at sunset von Reuter came stalking by. He stopped in the hayfield, near that sixth stack. Suddenly he blew a shrill blast on his whistle. He leaped forward, pistol covering the stack where Dick lay hidden. From all sides of the field, like magic, rose dozens of green-clad soldiers, their rifles leveled at Big Dick's breast as he heaved himself up out of the hay. A sardonic smile of triumph flitted across von Reuter's face as they led the American ace away, a second time captured, and this time seemingly doomed for certain to a spy's ignoble death.

CHAPTER IX

THE PIGEON

AT TWILIGHT Captain Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face, flight commander of the Royal Flying Corps and *Nummer Zwei* of the great secret *Nachrichtenamt*, was sailing his Camel back to the Fighters' home field from Denain, when he caught sight of a slate-blue pigeon with a milk-white breast beating the air above him and ahead of him.

He was at seven thousand feet. Over the lower earth long shadows had gathered, but the cloudless upper air was still smooth and clear. The sky had a curious silver luster, like a mirror. Across it the slate-blue pigeon trudged on rapid wings, making undeviatingly south.

It was a carrier, released somewhere behind the German lines and heading homeward with information for the English. The business of the captain was to make the life of such birds brief. He took after it faster than a hawk. He crouched over his control stick with a cold grin on his face. His pale eyes behind their amber-colored goggles had the look of a red fox's. So fast he overhauled the slate-blue bird that it appeared to be flapping motionless in the sky.

He hauled up his bow steeply toward it as it beat desperately. He went at it like a rocket. At twenty yards he opened up his bow Vickers, gunning at the bird's milk-white breast through the circle of his prop. With engine roaring, spitting fire, he shot at it head-on. It disappeared within the circle of his prop.

Sharp over he keeled. He stood his ship on her right ear, and looked around to watch the bird fluttering maimed or dead down through the sky. He came around in a fast flipper turn, and flipped over upside down, dropping into a dive. Down through a thousand feet of whistling space he plunged on the hunt for it, but saw it no more. It might have got hung up on the wires of his undercarriage. Or, as was more probable, it had been hurled away by his propeller blast, and gone whirling down at a distance in its last death throes. However he had lost sight of it, he was certain he had got it. For if he had missed, it would still be doggedly

trudging on across the sky, obeying the blind instinct of its breed.

He spun down to four thousand, then began climbing again. There was only a single slate-blue feather that had come whipping through his propeller, and now nestled softly against his breast.

In ten minutes he was above the Fighters' field. He cut his engine, and dove down through the whining air. The wind burned against his face. His stomach came into his throat. His heart beat slow and cold. At two hundred feet he leveled out dizzily, and banked around into the wind, setting his wings for a landing.

Just then he glanced behind him, at his ship's tail, for some reason he did not know. Upon the skid-fin sat the slate-blue pigeon with the milk-white breast, holding its head beneath its wing. It was no apparition. It was the bird. There it sat.

He stood on his rudder bar and shrieked a wild oath. Over his shoulder he hurled a monkeywrench. But the headless bird remained upon its perch, and the wind fluttered its slate-blue wings.

"Get off! Get away, you damned hoodoo!" the captain shrieked.

Just then the ground hit him. His last vision was of the blue and white pigeon skimming off into the air.

HE WASN'T much hurt, just dazed. No bones broken. His stomach and liver and spleen were still in their proper places. He got up from the ground where he had been hurled as quickly as a cat, and hopped around apparently all right.

But something had happened inside of him, and he didn't know what. It was something more than a broken rib or a ruptured kidney. The vision of that headless thing on his ship had sickened him, and he could not forget it. He knew that a man is not so clever as he ought to be, nor so cool and calculating and self-possessed, when he allows the sight of a roosting pigeon to throw him clear out of control and bring him down to wreck. He'd have to be more watchful of himself. More watchful.

O God, if that were possible! He had watched so long, so very carefully, the often as he lay sleepless in the night his hot eyes seemed to be burning holes

rough the smoky darkness about him. He had watched till the nerves of his eyes were naked raw, and the very look of things was like the scouring of hot sand upon them.

Yet watchful, more watchful yet. . . .

The Fighters pulled him to his feet. He pranced around a few paces, shaking his head. He seemed all right. The ship had come down on one wing, and its engine had had crushed into the turf. But why Captain Fairy Face had been flung far from the cockpit, and had landed like a cat.

The devil's own luck.

"I must be more watchful, more watchful yet," he kept muttering.

He put his arms around the shoulders of Washee Lee Long and Mud-Face Mortimer, and walked carefully over to his quarters. The two Fighters were still in their flying gear, covered with oil and very tired. Little Washee trembled beneath the captain's weight. It was probably he, rather than the captain, who should have been supported. A phosphor-cartridge had nicked his shoulder that day, and the wound was festering.

"Fritz is raising merry hell today, I guess you know," Mortimer said savagely. "He's pounding the top off Hill 439 with everything he's got. And he's moving down about a million men. It's like trying to keep ice in a furnace to try to keep any spotters up over Hunland today. Fritz has massed all his fighting crates from a hundred miles of front, and every time you stick your nose over he hops on you ten to one. Something terrible and big is going to pop before we see our shadows again."

"The Huns own the air today—that's no lie," Washee Long spat. "By God, they got Spider O'Brien, and there wasn't a better boy that ever flew. They laid for him in a cloud formation at twenty thousand, and they ganged him. And damn him, I say, for a bunch of dirty, yellow, sneaking buzzards."

"If we'd had Big Dick with us—" said Mortimer.

"Ah, Fahnestock!" said the captain. The beggar's flying with the blasted Huns today, I'll lay you odds on it, eh, what?"

"You lie in your teeth," said Washee Long. "And if you weren't my C. O., I'd tell you so."

The captain said no more about it. The thought came to him that he had better play another tune. It seemed hard to shake the faith of the Fighters in Big Dick Fahnestock.

He hobbled into his quarters between them, and fell down very wearily upon his cot.

"Tell that chappie, my batman what-you-call-him, tea and plenty of sugar," he said. Mortimer pulled off his boots for him, and left him there alone.

For a long time Captain Face lay curling his delicate feet and staring with a burning glance at the twilight that deepened out the window, until his hot eyes closed at last, and he breathed more easily, and fell into dreams of a headless bird that sat perched upon his heart with piercing claws.

HOW long the captain slept he did not know. And, happily for him, he did not remember what his dreams had been, except that in them he had been in hell. He aroused at a touch on his shoulder, and struggled to arise, brushing his long pale mustaches.

"Swipes?" he mumbled. "Swipes, you blasted beggar!"

Then he realized it could not be Swipes. Swipes was dead. Shot through the heart, for a fact, and dead these many long hours. Yet for a brief instant Captain Face, struggling out of his terrible dreams, was obsessed with the feeling that the dead batman was near him, and that many other dead men likewise were all about him.

It was Adjutant Harvey who stood beside his cot, holding a lamp to his face. The lamplight gleamed on Harvey's buttons. His hair was gray as granite rock, and his countenance was shadowed over with a gloomy look. There were other men who had come in with Harvey, eight or ten of them. Tall men, and deathly grim. The captain beheld them dimly as his eyes opened. They stood in the shadows outside the circle of the light, saying no word.

The captain sat up in bed, blinking his hot dry eyes. He reached for a lump of sugar on the table beside him.

"Take away that blasted light!" he snarled.

"Attention, Captain Face!" said Harvey. "Stand up, and salute!"

The captain saw that Adjutant Harvey wore a dress sword. Harvey's left hand gripped the hilt. The captain sat slowly curling his stockinged feet. He stared at Harvey's hand with fascination, seeing how strong it was, and how the thick blue veins stood out on it like cords.

"Eh?" he said. "Eh, what?"

He nibbled the lump of sugar. He looked beyond, with a cold pale glance, squinting his eyes against the light, to the ring of men who had come in with Harvey. One after the other he looked at them, blinking. Most of them were men he knew, division and brigade officers whose friendship he had cultivated. There was Colonel Wilberforce of the 141st Yeomen, a hard-swearing, red-faced old fathead, known as Old Blimey Eyes. There was a smiling man with a drowsy glance who was Brigadier-General the Viscount Worleigh, commanding officer of the three regiments of Fusileers who were holding Hill 439. There was a little round man like a rubber ball who was the very savage and merciless Harry Bing—Cold Steel Bing, Major-General of the 1st Division of the Lancashires. There was Wing Commander Peter Kelvey Price of the Fighters' own 39th, known for no reason whatever as Petey the Cheewee Bird. And there were other men in the dismal shadows.

The captain stared around him with a pale glance. He could name the ranks and commands of all of them. He had wormed himself into their friendship. He had dined and drunk with them—drunk the King's health and damnation to Fritz with them. He had won and lost his money at the cards with them, he'd roared out ribald songs with them, he had set their women on his knees, he was privileged to call them Blimey Eyes, and Skittles, Harry and Cheewee. They were all jolly men. He knew them well. A pack of fools.

But now their eyes were stern and dreadful on him. They stood in the shadows silently, each man carrying his sword. And there was something very terrible in their silence, so that a feeling of cold went creeping up and up over the heart of the captain.

He arose briskly, and stood rubbing his hands together.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said. "I am sorry you caught me napping."

From the darkness by the door, someone laughed in a hoarse voice at that.

"Eh?" said the captain, jerking his head back. "What?"

He pulled his mustaches and stared at the shadows. Beside the door he saw a figure he had not seen before, a giant old man nearly seven feet tall, with a lean bald skull, with a purple tumor over his face and a single glittering eye. The apparition wore the tartans of the King's Own Scots. The look of him was enough to freeze the Captain's bones. This man was Major-General Sir Keith Cothaven of the Scots, the Prettiest Lady from Hell, as he was known.

It was Cothaven who had laughed.

The captain felt sick. He braced himself, for all the world around him was doing a dead man's jig.

"Sir Keith!" he said, in a high shrill voice. "You have come about the court-martial, eh? The case of the spy Fahnestock? I did not expect you soon——"

Two sentries with fixed bayonets slipped up to him silently. They took post on either side of him.

"Well, gentlemen, what is it?" said the captain in his piercing voice. "What can I do for you? Won't you be seated, gentlemen? Please make yourselves at home. My batman will bring liqueurs and cigars in half a minute. Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen. Find yourselves chairs."

None of them answered him, though he went talking on and on, and on and on, in a high shrill voice like a cricket's. By and by he fell silent, too, and wiped his forehead which was drenched with sweat like rain.

Now the Prettiest Lady stirred from the shadows. He crossed the floor in three long strides. Silently he stared down at the shivering little captain. The lamp light glittered in his single eye—he had lost the other fighting against the Mahi at Ordurman thirty years before. The captain could not meet the look of the terrible old man. Something like the grip of a bone-cold hand had closed about his heart.

"We have heard from K-13," said Keith Cothaven.

"O God!"

"By carrier pigeon he transmits to

the originals of your correspondence with von Schmee."

"O God! O God!" whimpered the little captain.

The sentries jerked him up by the elbows as he fainted forward. His countenance had gone white as a dead man's. It would never be any other color again.

THERE are some who say that at the last he became a raving lunatic. That he laughed and screeched and prayed. That he vomited green. That he groveled on the floor and tried to kiss Cothaven's feet. That for a while he imagined he was a dog, and crouched on his paws and barked. It is true that there was heard for a long time the sound of his hideous shrieking.

But what happened to him in that place and afterward will never be accurately known. The men who buried him have sealed their lips.

CHAPTER X

BIG DICK STEPS OUT

AT TEN o'clock of that thunder-heavy night Big Dick Fahnestock was escorted into the presence of General von Schmee. He had been caught without chance of escape in the hayfield when von Reuter blew the whistle. If K-13 had not been trapped at the same time with him, the failure was not the fault of the keen and watchful *Nachrichtenamt*.

His time was up, and he knew it. He was no more than a mosquito to Paul Friedrich Hermann von Schmee, something to be caught and crushed when it grew troublesome. Now the mosquito was caught. Von Schmee would slap it. It gave Dick rather a curious feeling to realize that his own life, which seemed quite considerably important to him, was actually nothing at all to this huge black-bearded man with the gleaming eyes. No more than the life of a mosquito.

Von Schmee stood behind his desk, sticking colored pins into a large-scale map that was spread out on it. He looked at Dick and yawned.

"This American fool again?" he said. "I was under the impression he had been disposed of. What have you got out of him, Kleinhals?"

Colonel von Kleinhals spread out his palms with an empty gesture.

"He knows nothing, or pretends not to."

Von Schmee moved another pin, marking the farther advance of one of his regiments toward Laraine Wood. There were seventy odd of those pins in the contour map that covered his wide desk top. Pins in six colors: blue for the 2nd Pomeranians, orange for the 38th Poseners, violet for the 17th Saxons, yellow and green for the 11th and 21st Silesians, and black for the Jigsaw Division from Berlin, that included the great Brandenburg Guards. Opposed to them were three red pins, marking the English positions as he had read them in the hour before the dawn that day.

"Upon the discovery of this Englishman's hiding place by my operatives," said von Kleinhals, "we laid a trap around him and held it for half an hour. I regret to report that K-13 made no attempt to communicate with him."

"You should have held the trap all night," von Schmee said. "K-13 would have come."

"Unfortunately my aide, von Reuter, blundered upon the Englishman and gave the alarm," said Kleinhals. "There was no advantage in holding the trap any longer. We took the Englishman when he tried to kill von Reuter with his hands—by striking full force with the naked fist, after the savage and inhuman English fashion."

Von Schmee rested his hairy knuckles on the map. His great bald head was corrugated with thought. For a moment he stared at Dick, and the shadows of lights passed over his eyes.

"You tried to assassinate Herr Oberleutnant von Reuter, Englishman?" he said curiously.

"Call it assassination if you want," said Dick. "I poked a couple at von Reuter's jaw, and he slammed me back. He's the first one of you Huns I ever met that knew how to use his mitts for anything else than scratching cooties."

Von Schmee nodded slowly. His eyes were mere pinpoints of light now. His heavy brain was agitating itself profoundly.

"Who is K-13?" he said.

"Who trimmed your beard?" said Dick.

"Who is K-13, Englishman!"

"Don't wallop your desk so hard," said

Dick. "You'll bust a blood vessel, and you'll be squirting all over the place."

"Who was the pretended peasant girl that aided you to escape last night?"

"Old Kleinhals here," said Dick. "Didn't you guess it? He buttoned that red bush of his up behind his ears and stuck a pillow into the seat of his pants to give himself a pair of hips. You can figure he was a pretty sight. You'd hardly have recognized him."

"You do not know who K-13 is, Englishman?" said von Schmee with a keen look.

Dick didn't answer him.

The corrugated wrinkles smoothed out on von Schmee's head. His little eyes twinkled. He rubbed his hands together. Thoughtfully he nodded.

"His silence is an answer, Kleinhals," he said with satisfaction. "Send in to me at once the member of your command who is known as Sergeant Wolf, orderly to Lieutenant von Reuter. As for this fool, we have no further need of him. Have him shot."

"At what hour, Excellency?"

"At once!" said von Schmee impatiently, waving his hand.

He bent to his map again. He moved one of the colored pins five centimeters forward—a regiment had advanced another mile. Out in the anteroom a battery of telegraph instruments were clacking. Commissioned aides and orderlies were rushing in and out all the time, laying reports of troop movements before him as they were received.

The Invincible's regiments were moving down to the front. The zero hour was coming on. Already von Schmee had forgotten Dick Fahnestock. He was not concerned with mosquitoes.

HE WAS led along a road under spreading elms and locusts toward the old brick wall down behind the stables. Stars burned in a clear sky. The wind was hot and suffocating.

Sentries had been doubled through all the grounds of Oldemonde. They were alert and on edge, in the mood which makes men shoot at shadows. Their sharp challenges rang forth almost constantly.

"Halt an! Wer geht?"

"Colonel the Count von Kleinhals, Chief of Communications, with a squad and one prisoner!"

"Advance, Colonel von Kleinhals, and give the countersign!"

"Cothaven!"

"Pass on!"

A grounding of arms and a rifle salute, as Kleinhals led his dark squad past, down toward the old brick wall.

They went hurriedly, often breaking into double-time at a curt command from Kleinhals to the corporal. Von Schmee had been anxious to have this thing over with, and in secret. He was afraid of English reprisals. There were a corporal and eight men with bayonets fixed who marched behind and beside Dick Fahnestock along that last dark way. And Kleinhals and himself made eleven. Yet he had a feeling that there was one man more.

Perhaps the German soldiers had the feeling, too. They gripped their rifles more firmly. Their eyes darted to either side. Von Kleinhals flashed a bright electric torch into every shrub as he approached.

Someone came running with a sharp tread after them down the blue-stone road. Kleinhals drew the squad to a halt. They stood with cocked rifles. Kleinhals directed his flashlight back along the road.

"Orders from His Excellency, Herr Oberst!"

The form of Lieutenant von Reuter loomed into the yellow beam. He came at a run, breathing quickly.

"His Excellency's compliments, and report to him at once, Herr Oberst!"

Kleinhals let the beam sink from von Reuter's face.

"H'm! H'm!" he said thoughtfully. "What is the occasion?"

Von Reuter came up. He spoke in a lowered voice to von Kleinhals' ear. His voice was breaking with joy.

"K-13 has been found, Herr Oberst!"

"What!"

"Caught red-handed, Herr Oberst!" panted von Reuter jubilantly. "His game is up. His Excellency requests you to report to him immediately."

Colonel von Kleinhals rumbled his great red beard. His hand was trembling with excitement. He turned to the corporal of the guard squad.

"Proceed! Proceed, Opfer!" he said hurriedly. "Carry out His Excellency's orders in regard to the prisoner, Fahne-

stock. At ten paces. If he desires time for meditation or prayer, allow him ninety seconds. Also, the blindfold may be omitted as a courtesy. Seven cartridges, and one blank. You yourself will give the *coup de grace*. All is understood?"

"At your command, Herr Oberst!" grunted the stolid corporal. "I know the routine."

"I will dispatch a medical officer to certify to the fact. Postpone interment until his arrival."

"*Zu Befehl, Herr Oberst!*"

Accompanied by his brisk young aide, Kleinhals hurried away. His flashlight cut pale circles on the blue-stone road. Presently the light vanished off in a turning of the park, and the sound of the running feet died away.

Corporal Opfer, his squad and his prisoner, stood watching for a moment, till the light had gone and a silence had descended again over the giant black elms and locusts. They understood that terrible things were about to happen. The feeling of them hung dark and heavily in the air. After a minute the corporal flashed his short non-com's sword.

"*Gewehr—auf! Schwadron—vorwärts!*"

They took up the march in silence.

MOSQUITOES droned. Beetles went rushing by like bullets through the darkness. The hot, choking night wind stirred great bushes of hydrangea and syringa. Here and there again they were challenged by sentries. Dick Fahnestock stalked amid the grim and silent men. Once he reached up to snatch a handful of edible leaves from an overhanging mulberry. A bayonet prodded him promptly in the buttock.

They moved down behind the abandoned stables, and went across a manured enclosure toward the old brick wall. There was a gnarled apple tree that leaned over the wall, and the bricks were covered with ivy that was alive with rustling leaves. Suddenly a bright electric torch flashed on them from the summit of the wall, and they were challenged for the last time.

"*Halt an! Wer geht?*"

"Corporal Opfer of the guard, with a squad and one condemned man!"

"Advance, corporal, and give the countersign!"

"Cothaven!"

"Stand where you are!"

The corporal had advanced four paces ahead of his halted squad. He stood bewildered, blinking his eyes at the blinding light. It lay on top of the wall, and there was blackness behind it. The blackness of the apple tree. The blackness of the stars.

"Orders of His Excellency!" the corporal cried. "A spy to be shot!"

"Stand where you are!"

The corporal cursed beneath his breath. As he stared harder, he beheld upon the wall just behind the light the thick air-cooled muzzle of a machine gun. All else was blackness.

"His Excellency—" he croaked.

"Stand where you are, you swine! Drop arms, all of you!"

Well, a machine gun is a machine gun. Corporal Opfer and his squad knew it. It is something that makes a man sick at his stomach when he sees it at fifteen paces off.

"Drop arms!"

The rifles clattered.

Corporal Opfer stood blinking. He swore and sweated.

"Who are you," he shouted, "giving commands to a firing squad under orders of His Excellency? I demand your rank?"

"Lieutenant," said the voice from the blackness.

The corporal gave a grudging salute.

"Your name, sir?"

Said the voice from the blackness—

"*K-Dreizehn!*"

BIG DICK FAHNESTOCK chewed his mulberry leaves. He picked up one of the rifles and clutched it between his knees. Across the bayonet blade he sawed apart the ropes about his wrists.

"Do any of you Huns know English?" barked the voice from the blackness.

None of the Germans replied. They stood bewildered, hands held high.

"Run like hell, big boy," said the voice in pure American. "You'll find old Kleinhals lying blotto up the road, a quarter mile from where he left you. Pile yourself into his rags, hide him, and lie low. I've cleared the way around your ship. Can you fly it?"

"Can a grasshopper hop?" said Dick.

"I'll meet you there before midnight, if

I can. If not by midnight, make your break alone. And good luck to you, big boy."

"Do you think I'd fly without you, K-13?" growled Dick

"If I'm not with you by midnight at the latest," said the voice from the darkness quietly, "that means my game is over. So save your hide, and don't try to be an ass of a hero. You can't help me. Don't hold me up. Good luck to you, big boy, and beat it!"

Big Dick took a bayonet and cut the suspenders of the bewildered Germans. It was an old trick he had learned from the Paris police, having had it used on himself on occasion when arrested as drunk and disorderly. Their hands were up, but their pants came down. Man cannot run well that way.

"I'll meet you again tonight, K-13," he said, "at the ship or at the gates ajar. I'll not hop alone. If you're not with me, von Schmee and several other Huns will roast in hell tonight."

He gathered up the rifles and hurled them over the wall. He took the sidearms from Corporal Opfer, and sent them the same way. Then he wheeled, and ran on, his toes into the night.

Behind the wall K-13 kept silence. But the wicked muzzle was still upon the Huns. It held them there till Dick was clear away.

After a long, sweating minute Corporal Opfer dropped his hands. He pulled up his pants. With a growl he started to rush toward the unseen warder.

"Stand where you are!"

None of them tried it again. Stolidly they stood confronting the blazing light and the pointed gun. They held their arms elevated till they were numb and their eyes were reeling. They were disciplined cattle. And they knew the meaning of death.

They stood there, blinking and cursing beneath their breath, till the battery of the electric torch began to fail and its blinding light grew dimmer. Then they could see that the machine gun on the wall was only a piece of cast iron pipe. They rushed it with wild yells. They hoched the Kaiser and damned the English swine. They were the great Invincibles, and they weren't afraid of a piece of cast iron pipe.

Over the old brick wall they swarmed

into the little graveyard beyond it, not pausing to go around. They ran through the grass like yammering foxhounds. Snatching up their empty guns, they bayoneted the gnarled old apple tree and a couple of toads in the grass.

"*Verdamme Engländer!*"

But there was nothing for them to bayonet except the ivy on the old brick wall, except the gnarled tree and the toads and five mounds against the wall in the little graveyard, weed-grown and without a marker to tell what victims of the Butcher's hate lay in this quiet spot.

THROUGH the night beneath huge whispering trees Dick Fahnestock dashed like a two-legged deer. Twice sentries shouted challenges to him. He evaded them, swerving quickly between the ancient trees and shrubbery masses of Oldemonde's parks. Their frightened voices, half doubtful they had seen him, dwindled away into nervous oaths or apologetic laughter.

He came to the boll of a gigantic beech tree beside the blue-stone road, and found Colonel the Count von Kleinhals, suspicious-eyed fox of the *Nachrichtenamt*, lying bound and gagged with his back to the massive trunk, stripped to his underwear. The tall red-bearded man was stirring to half-consciousness then. Dick dragged him deep into a clump of uncleared juniper, and there changed his own torn and muddied British uniform for the garments of von Kleinhals.

They were no bad fit, for Kleinhals himself was a big man. Clad from black field boots to *pickelhaube*—spiked helmet, "pimple-cap" as the Germans called it—he stepped forth in the uniform of an Oberst of the imperial and royal 17th Saxon. He forced himself to go at a steady, easy pace, making by a circuitous route toward the place where last night he had left his ship.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Colonel von Kleinhals!"

"Advance, Colonel von Kleinhals, and give the countersign!"

"Cothaven!"

"Pass on!"

He passed on, taking the salute. And if his thumb was sometimes at his nose when he did so, the stiff-backed sentries never saw it. Soldiers, he realized more

profoundly than he ever had before, do not look at faces but at rank markings. Yet there was always the chance that some sentry might challenge him who knew Kleinbals well. Partially to avoid recognition, he buttoned up about his chin the high choker collar of his summer overcoat, and sank his head down in it to the nose. He passed by five sentry posts undisputed.

Before eleven he arrived on the treeless lawns in front of the château, and saw his own sweet Sopwith still standing by the edge of the water, where he had brought it down twenty-three hours before. The huge hospital cross that lay on the ground near by was not lighted tonight. The vicinity was dark except for the reflection of stars in the rippleless shallow water.

He paced up and down. There was no apparent guard on the ship. He wetted his finger and examined the direction of the wind. It was due south. He would have a clear runway into it. At a time when there was no one around he ventured to examine the ship. She had an hour's petrol still in her tanks. Her control wires, wings and under-carriage were undamaged.

He paced up and down along the margin of the carp pond. Not too near the ship, no. Head bent, hands clasped behind him, he gave as good an imitation as he was able of Colonel von Kleinbals immersed in profound reflection. There was great bustle in the château. Motor cars were roaring up and roaring away again. Frequently a pair of officers or a rapidly running orderly passed around the edge of the pond, saluting when they saw him. Once three officers in a group paused and examined the English ship curiously, and there was one of them who gave him a sharp look.

But there was no man who came alone. K-13 did not come.

He paced up and down. He heard the striking of the quarter-hours five times from a great bell above the doors of the château. He paced up and down, and the midnight came.

The midnight came, but K-13 did not come.

Big Dick turned then and stalked toward von Schmee's headquarters without hesitation. He knew now that they

had got K-13. He knew that he himself would kill von Schmee, and die fighting.

CHAPTER XI

THE EXECUTIONER

LEUTNANT VON REUTER of the Prussian Guards—more precisely, the Brandenburg Guards, the Ignorants, as they called themselves, *die herrlichen Unwissenden, die kaiserlichen und königlichen Unueberwindlichen*—stood before his beautiful gilt-framed Eighteenth Century mirror in the hunting lodge of Oldemonde, trying to make a monocle stay put in front of his eye.

The hunting lodge was at present the quarters of the junior staff officers of the 7th Corps. Here Lieutenant von Reuter slept, when he slept. Here he found it convenient to transact certain of his business.

The hour was eleven of the night when von Reuter stood there playing with his monocle. He heard the striking of a bell from the château beyond the beechwoods. Above the door of von Schmee's great headquarters the bell was sounding the hour. It had a heavy sound. It was cast of old cannon iron from the field of Waterloo, not many miles away.

Eleven o'clock. For the Invincibles, the zero hour. Now down in the muddy bottomlands of Laraine Wood, upon the Somme, forty odd miles to the south by west from Oldemonde, they would be moving up out of their trenches in a black and silent mass, a wall of bayonets, a tidal surge of steel, eighty thousand men of them going forward in parade rank three miles wide and twenty men deep, to smash the wedge through the English lines that would win Paris and the sea. Now down in the trap of Laraine Wood the Prettiest Lady lay with his Bantams, his Yeomen, and his kilted Scots, to blow them into hell.

Eleven o'clock. *Bing-bong! bing-bong! bing-bong! bing-bong! bing-bong! bing-bong! bing...* Thus the bell struck. Von Schmee would not forget that hour.

The warlords of Germany would not forget that hour. The widows of the Invincibles would not forget it.

Lieutenant von Reuter dusted a grain of brick mortar off the sleeve of his blouse.

Softly he whistled a bar of "*Die Lorelei*" while he tried to make his monocle stick in his eye.

*"The loveliest maiden is sitting,
Wonderfully over there,
Her golden jewels are glittering,
She combs her golden hair. . . ."*

There was no defect of vision in either of his dark blue eyes. On the contrary, they were unusually keen and observant. Nevertheless, in his position as an exalted Oberleutnant of the Brandenburg Guard and aide to Herr Oberst Graf von Kleinhals, it was imperative that Ritter von Reuter master the art of wearing a monocle, even though one only, like his, of plain glass.

"Pig dog!" he swore as the glass popped out of his eye. "Thunder weather!"

He tried screwing it in, twisting it around and around in the bony socket between his cheekbone and his elevated eyebrow. He wetted the edges of it with his tongue, and tried plastering it on.

"Thor's hammer and the whiskers of nine million defunct cats!" he swore.

Or words to that effect. And plenty of them. In choice and perfectly accented *Hoch Deutsch*, the most marvelous engine ever invented by the human intellect to express anger, disgust, malediction, execration, vituperation, and old fashioned honest blasphemy.

"Unnennbare Greule und Zoten! Fünfzehntausend Sauen mit zahllosen Teufelhundwürfen!" he shouted. *"Schweinigelei undsoweiter, undsoweiter!"*

The nimble circle of glass popped out again, like a cuckoo out of a clock.

Yet he was smiling with a small quiet smile at his reflection in the mirror, even in the midst of his most guttural blasphemies. He had the habit of smiling. Indeed, had not Herr Oberst Graf von Kleinhals warned him only yesterday afternoon, as they were returning from the hayfield with the messages of the flying, that he laughed too much? An air of levity was bad for a soldier. It indicated an empty mind.

Perhaps it was best, though, that Lieutenant von Reuter had a facility at smiling. He could smile even now, in a moment when he knew very well that Old Captain

Death was about ready to tap him on the shoulder.

Delicately he held the glass between thumb and forefinger. He brought it up cautiously back of his ear and slipped it into place quickly, taking his eye by surprise. It was home at last, after the fifteenth or thirty-second try. It stuck. It did not budge. It stayed as if cemented.

"Ach!" he rejoiced, laughing heartily. *"Gott ist im Himmel! Der Feind ist zerschmissen!"*

He turned his handsome face admiringly to right and left above the high choker collar that held his chin like a curb bit. Softly he rubbed a speck off the mirror. He straightened his chin a sixteenth of an inch. He smoothed down a disarranged hair in his eyebrows.

"Very handsome, my boy. Very handsome," he said. "I feel sorry for the ladies who love you. Yet who can blame them?"

Again the monocle popped out.

BUT THIS is not to narrate the efforts of a young Prussian Guardsman to wear a monocle after the much envied fashion of the English. At the same moment ten thousand other junior officers of the All Highest's mighty armies were doubtless practicing the same art before their mirrors along a thousand miles of battle front, from Gallipoli to the Vosges and the marches of the Tannenberg, wherever the conquering gray-green armies lay. A lady of the chorus would sooner omit her lipstick than a German junior officer his monocle.

The thoughts of von Reuter were not very much concerned with the fool's play he was acting. In the mirror all the time he was watching the door behind him. He was watching his windows, too.

The fool's play was giving him time to think. A little nerve twitched warningly in the ramrod of his spine. There was a very audible silence beyond the closed door, beyond the iron-barred windows. The silence that is the loudest noise in all this terrible world. The silence of unseen watching men creeping about cautiously.

A blade of grass rustled on the turf beyond the windows. A floor board whispered in the corridor beyond the door.

"That fellow Wolf he is like a disease," thought von Reuter.

His heart was beating with a quicker, more powerful urge. Life is never so sweet as when it is very perilous, and only a little of it remains. He yawned as he played with his monocle. Old Captain Death stood ready to tap him on the shoulder.

He heeled about smartly. He did not glance at door or window. He did not touch hand to his Luger, for death would not come that way. Straight as a post he marched to his desk. He sorted over the official communications lying neatly piled on it, whistling meditatively. After a moment he leaned back and rolled a cigaret. He smoked it down to the husk, staring at a flag-draped picture of the Kaiser that faced him on the wall.

When that cigaret was finished, or soon after, Old Captain Death would tap him, and demand the last salute.

He pulled forth another cigaret paper, but did not fill it. Bending to his desk, he wrote a brief memorandum on the paper in a fine almost microscopic hand. He inserted this carefully into the stack of military correspondence lying on his blotter.

He arose and crossed over to his fireplace, staring down at certain charred ashes which lay in it. He had burned all scraps of any value. He observed a small knot of yellow hair which had not been quite consumed. It was a fragment of a woman's wig. There was also a bit of a light petticoat such as the peasant women wore. He thrust these with his toe into the flame which still flickered. He heard the clock strike the quarter hour, and all was now burned up.

He squared his shoulders. Clicking his heels, he saluted the flag-draped picture on the wall.

"All Highest!" he said, with one eye closed.

He strode to the door. His face had paled a trifle, but his hand did not tremble. Coolly he unlocked the door and flung it open.

The corridor was dimly lit. Sergeant-Ordonnanz Wolf stood there in a black officer's cape. His deep-set eyes were like the eyes of a skull.

Farther down the corridor two white-faced junior officers were pacing

ceaselessly. Herrschel and Abendstern, of the *Nachrichtenamt*. Von Reuter knew them by sight and reputation. Other figures, non-commissioned officers and privates, lounged apparently innocuously in window recesses and beside the outer door. But each man of them was armed with pistol and bayonet-sword.

Oh, had it come now?

Von Reuter nodded curtly at Wolf's salute. He stood drawing on white cotton gloves, setting them carefully finger by finger.

"On duty again, Wolf?" he said. "I missed you there for a while."

"Yes, Herr Leutnant, I lost track of you."

"Still, on the whole, you have been faithful, Wolf," said von Reuter. "I have known always where to find you. Now I have business with His Excellency, Wolf. If there is any inquiry made for me, I shall return presently."

"*Zu Befehl!*" said Wolf.

Von Reuter strode one pace away. There was a stirring in the corridor, like the stirring in the body of a great snake. How far would they let him go? Why had Wolf not said the word, and ended it? He heeled about and faced Wolf again, setting his cap more jauntily.

"By the way, Wolf," he said, "you have been the best man that ever served me. Perhaps when the day is over you will desire a recommendation. What was your trade or business before entering the Army?"

"*Ich war Scharfrichter,*" said Wolf.

"Ah, a sharp judge—an executioner," said von Reuter, playing with his monocle. "It is an honest trade. Hangman or headman, Wolf?"

"Both," said Wolf stolidly. "But I was better with the ax."

"And you enjoyed your work?" said von Reuter.

"I loved it!" said Sergeant Wolf.

"That is good," said von Reuter, nodding. "It is good to enjoy one's work."

The lounging men sprang up as silent as shadows when he went out the door into the night. The two quick-eyed young lieutenants of the *Nachrichtenamt*, Herrschel and Abendstern, fell into step on either side of him and a half pace behind him.

"On your way to headquarters, did I hear you say, sir?" asked Herrschel smoothly. "I was just on my way there, myself. Mind if we stroll along with you?"

"Not at all," said von Reuter pleasantly. "Glad of your company."

There were other men creeping around him as he went through the darkness. He did not see them, but he knew that they were there. Did the fools think he was blind?

Old Captain Death had not tapped him yet. But the hand was poised above his shoulder. There was something more the hounds of the *Nachrichtenamt*, wanted out of him. They wanted him to try to communicate with whatever accomplices he might have. They were giving him a bit of rope.

He walked away, and the grim men walked with him. The hand of the Captain of the Last Command hung for the moment poised above his shoulder.

SENTRIES sprang forth with poised bayonets at frequent intervals, barking their challenges. A feeling of terror was in the air of Oldemonde. The sentries were as nervous as mice. Yet they did not know of what they were afraid. Already earlier in the night, von Reuter knew, a tragedy had occurred. Failing to answer a challenge quickly enough, fat and genial Major-General Ferdinand Schmid of the 38th Poseners had been shot through the neck by an excited guard.

"Who goes? Who goes! Stand, or we'll shoot!"

"Lieutenant von Reuter of Communications, Lieutenants Herrschel and Abendstern of Intelligence," von Reuter answered these challenges calmly. "The countersign—Cothaven! Keep your heads, men. The English haven't gobbled you up yet."

The windows of von Schmee's great corps headquarters were ablaze with light from cellar to roof. They would be burning all this night. All this terrible night. Officers were rushing up and down the worn stone entrance steps. Automobiles and motorcycles roared rapidly away, carrying tense-faced officers with pistols in their fists. Radio aerials on Oldemonde's roof hummed in the wind, as if overburdened with profound and disastrous secrets.

On the steps of Oldemonde von Reuter paused and rolled a cigaret. The two hounds of the *Nachrichtenamt* halted stiffly behind him. He blew a smoke wreath to the sky.

"Forgotten what I wanted to tell His Excellency," he said. "Doubtless of no consequence. The night, however, is pleasant. Shall we stroll on for a while, gentlemen, or will you leave me here?"

"It is a beautiful night for a walk," said Abendstern.

"I was just thinking, myself, it would be fine to get a breath of fresh air," said Herrschel hastily.

From the corner of his eye he caught the significant nod they exchanged. Giving him a bit more rope, eh? Thinking he might make some inadvertent sign that would betray the loyal peasants who had aided him?

Shrewd and patient knaves they were, Herrschel and Abendstern. True hounds of the *Nachrichtenamt*. He knew their reputation. Why play the game longer? Let it be done with, and the suspense ended. Let the expected hand tap him on the shoulder.

"You like to walk?" he said.

"It is my greatest pleasure, Herr Oberleutnant."

He strode off at a lithe and easy pace, taking any way that opened before him. They walked under elms and beeches where drowsy birds stirred. They walked through the cedar wood and over the hayfields. They kicked up dust along the highroads where the rolling camions had gone. Making for himself cigaret after cigaret, he halted at times and commented on the beauties of the night with his grim companions.

"What magnificent stars!" he said. "Have you ever seen them looking brighter and nearer to us than they do tonight?"

"Very lovely stars," grunted Herrschel, as if he had nothing more to do than admire the constellations ten billion miles away that burned in the sky of the Lion.

The face of Abendstern was whiter than the starlight.

"It is said it is a sign of death when they look so bright that way," he said.

"Notice the contour of that tree, gentlemen," von Reuter said later. "That willow over there, standing by the water all alone. What does it remind you of?"

"Why, it reminds me of a willow," said Herrschel.

"An elephant?" hazarded Abendstern.

"It reminds me of a kneeling woman, crying with her hands pressed to her face," von Reuter said.

"Now that you mention it, I see the resemblance," agreed Herrschel.

"You men, like myself, are lovers of nature, I can see," von Reuter said. "I have often made the remark that a man who can enjoy the beauties of nature is not altogether vile. You have a dirty business. Yet I can see that you are men of sensibilities."

They walked miles, he aimlessly, they keen and watchful at his side. Wherever he paused, whenever his casual glances turned toward some object in the darkness, he knew that many unseen men all about him had begun immediately to search the locality. Hunting for his accomplices. Hunting for whomever he might be trying to communicate with, if anyone.

He was surrounded in the night with those grim invisible shapes. No chance of breaking away from them. Though no word had yet been spoken, though no hand had been laid on him, nevertheless he knew that Old Captain Death had summoned him. He must go now and face the last roll call.

"Down by the marches of the Meser, where I am fond of going fishing," he said, "there is a pigeon-cote. The last pigeon flew away today, a slate-blue bird with a milk-white breast. Doubtless that is unfortunate, since otherwise you gentlemen might find it pleasant sport to go down there and do a little shooting. Now I shall probably never go fishing there again, nor feed the pigeons, nor take any more of these midnight walks."

He turned around, and led them back on their return along the shore of the shallow fish pond. Frogs croaked. The wind rippled. Coarse grasses shivered and shook in the edges of the water.

The deserted Sopwith of Big Dick Fahnestock stood near the water. Von Reuter paid no attention to it. He walked on past. It was Herrschel who paused a moment, making an apology. He had been limping along for some time with a fallen arch. He steadied himself with a hand on the ship's propeller, massaging his foot.

"Queer there's no guard," he said.

"Don't fool yourself," said Abendstern.

He nodded significantly to where, a hundred yards away, a tall figure in officer's uniform was pacing up and down, with head bent thoughtfully and hands clasped behind him. For a moment von Reuter himself was almost deceived. In pickelhaube, boots and greatcoat, Dick Fahnestock had captured the meditative air of Colonel von Kleinhals to the life.

"The old fox himself," whispered Abendstern.

"He doesn't let many tricks escape him," said Herrschel.

They straightened up and clicked to the salute. The pacing man gave them no heed. They walked on past him.

THE HALF hour struck. Deep in the ground there seemed to be stirring a faint inaudible trembling, like the movement of volcanoes a thousand miles below the earth's crust. And a low vibration strummed on the hot and heavy wind, the south wind, the wind that blew up from Laraine Wood forty-odd miles away.

"Cannonading?" said Herrschel.

"No, the wind," said Abendstern.

"It couldn't be cannonading," agreed Herrschel. "Von Schmee has sent them through without bombardment."

"It couldn't possibly be cannonading," repeated Abendstern.

That deep and inaudible vibration did not die away, but grew heavier.

"What do you make it out to be, Herr Oberleutnant?" said Herrschel, staring at Ritter von Reuter uneasily.

"Ask von Schmee."

The quarter of midnight struck. A pallid light grew on the eastern horizon. Von Reuter nodded when he saw the silver glow. The moon was coming up.

"We're in for a bright night—which is all the better," said Abendstern.

Von Reuter smiled faintly. He polished his monocle. He walked toward the hunting lodge. The watchful officers pressed nearer to him now. He caught glimpses of their tense countenances when he half turned his head. They had their hands on their pistols. From the darkness all about him the vague shapes of men were closing in.

"A beautiful night, gentlemen," he said

quietly. "It is a pleasure to be alive on such a night. We have had an agreeable stroll together. I thank you for your company. But we must leave the night now, gentlemen."

They did not answer him. They realized that he knew.

IT WAS nearly midnight when he came back to his quarters in the hunting lodge. He squared his shoulders and flung open the door.

"Before I take my final departure, Wolf," he said, "I am reminded that I should bid you adieu, and thank you for your many past attentions."

The bony-faced executioner looked at him somberly. He stood like a scarecrow in his black cape. There were other men in the room, four or five of them. The place had been upturned in a thorough and patient searching. The very goosefeathers of the bed were spilled out on the floor.

"The mask is off?" said Wolf, and his teeth gleamed.

"I am doubtful," said von Reuter shrugging, "that it was ever on for you."

"I have been watching, I have been watching," said Wolf.

He chuckled to himself. He rubbed his bony hands together. He threw back his cape, exposing a breast loaded with medals and the collar markings of a major of the Germany Army.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said, "to you who have known me only in an inferior capacity. I am Herr Major Carl Wolf, of the *Nachrichtenamt*."

"I have long been acquainted," said von Reuter, making a bow, "with your identity, Wolf. Allow me to introduce myself—John Doe, of some place in the United States of America, civil engineer by training, soldier of fortune by inclination, captain of the British Intelligence by profession, a lover of free men and free nations, a hater to the death of autocracy and militarists, of butchers and executioners and all such swine."

He made an elegant bow again. He sloughed off his white cotton gloves. He laid them on the table, and his Guards cap on top of them. He unpinned the insignia of his rank, and set them on the pile. He stood playing with his monocle, smiling easily.

There were men on both sides of him, gripping his shoulders securely.

"You have been a faithful follower, Wolf, as well as you were able," he said, with that quiet smile. "If at times I have avoided your attentions, the fault was not yours. You have become as familiar to me as my own shadow. Doubtless I shall miss you when I have gone."

"Where you are going, K-13," said Wolf, "neither I nor your own shadow will follow you."

His head jerked back, and he barked out a laugh.

"Remove this Englishman's sidearms, and search him thoroughly for any other weapon!" he said. "There is no need of keeping up the game any longer. He understands. I assume that he exposed none of his accomplices?"

Herrschel spread his palms.

"He led us on a wild-goose chase," he said.

Wolf gave von Reuter an ugly look.

"There are ways to make you talk," he said. "It won't be any pleasanter for you because you require us to use them."

Von Reuter bowed his sleek dark head. If there had been any chance for him to use his Luger, he would have done so long ago. Now it was taken from him. He was stripped to the waist.

"My congratulations to you and to Madame Alys Dervanter, Wolf," he said. "The *Nachrichtenamt* has no keener hounds. Von Kleinhals himself never doubted me. But you and Madame Alys—I have watched your work with some admiration. Not that it was brilliant, but it was very patient."

He went to a wardrobe and took from the top shelf a square black bottle, on which wisps of cobwebs still were clinging. It had come from Oldemonde's cellars, a brandy distilled forty years ago. He set down two glasses, and poured two thimblefuls. The liquor was thick as sirup, sweet and aromatic and stronger than any whisky.

"It is good brandy, Wolf," he said. "It is not a way out. You have my word on it. I am not a man to choose so cheap an ending, as you may know. Here's to your widow, Wolf. May she come to dance often on your grave."

Slowly he rolled the liquor over his tongue. He walked to a window and stared

toward the south. A lopsided moon had come up in the purple sky. The quiet grounds of Oldemonde were washed with silver. He cocked his head, and listened.

"Inform His Excellency's aide," Wolf said to Herrschel, "that K-13 is arrested. Get in touch also with Colonel von Kleinhals. We are ready to proceed."

Over the beechwoods from von Schmee's headquarters the iron bell clanged the midnight. *Bing-bong! bing-bong! bing-bong! bing-bong! bing-bong! bing-bong!* . . . The heavy echoes died away. Faint sharp cries came through the darkness, the challenges of the sentries to their reliefs.

Wolf slipped up behind von Reuter and pulled him back. He peered forth warily, with unwinking eyes. There was nothing outside except two sentries pacing slowly across the moonlight on the grass.

"What were you looking at, K-13?" the executioner snarled.

"At the moon," said von Reuter.

Wolf's head was twitching nervously. He had begun to shudder at the sound of the heavy midnight bell.

"What have you done with Fahnestock?" he said.

"Is there anything more you want to know?" replied von Reuter gently.

Wolf pulled forth a cigaret paper and spread it delicately on his palm.

"I found this memorandum," he said. "There were no other papers of any value. What does it mean? It will not be harder for you if you show some willingness to help us."

"You do not know the code?" said von Reuter.

"The code will be discovered," said Wolf. "The *Nachrichtenamt* is patient."

"I will save you wear and tear on your brains," von Reuter said, "since you have need of conserving all you possess. It is not code. It is Latin—*dente lupus, cornu taurus petit*. It is from the 'Satires' of the ancient poet Horace, and the meaning is, 'The wolf attacks with his teeth, the bull with his horns.'"

"The significance?" said Wolf sharply.

There was a strained and expectant look on von Reuter's handsome face. He was listening, listening, listening. And suddenly he heard it, faint and far off, a sound that swiftly would grow louder, drowning out all other sounds in Oldemonde. He heard it unmistakably, though it was only a

faint whisper yet, a low wild-bee humming sound from the direction of the moon. A light flashed in his stormy eyes. He straightened up, throwing his head back.

Wolf had not heard. He pressed his gaunt bony face closer to von Reuter, staring with hard and merciless eyes.

"The significance of the ancient poet's words, K-13?" he demanded again, tapping his finger repeatedly on the paper in his palm.

"The significance is, that all things fight with whatever weapons they may have, executioner," replied von Reuter in a louder, more jubilant voice. "The wolf attacks with his teeth, the bull with his horns. And I, being niether wolf nor bull, attack—with TNT!"

They heard it then, Wolf and Abendstern and the rest of them heard it, the crescendo droning of the British ships that were coming up across the sky! Cursing and yelling, they fought their way to the windows of the room. They clawed at one another. Rank was forgotten in a frenzy of blind terror. Not more than a thousand feet above Oldemonde there came the roaring Handley-Page night bombers in a wild duck wedge, sweeping fast across the center of the moon-drenched sky!

Ritter von Reuter threw back his head. He laughed into the face of the executioner as the first crash fell, an appalling and terrible crash.

CHAPTER XII

THE SEVENTH SHOT

AT THE striking of midnight Big Dick Fahnestock broke off his interminable pacing by the border of the fish pond. He knew now that von Reuter would not join him, though he waited the night through. The ultimate hour appointed had come and gone, and the hounds of the *Nachrichtenamt* had caught K-13 at last.

"Now here's where von Schmee goes spinning down in fire, and a few more choice Huns with him," thought Big Dick Fahnestock.

He might have spun the propeller of his ship then, and hopped off into the night. The sward was level and hard-rolled. The way was clear. He had a

runway of four hundred yards against the wind. In an hour he could have been safe home, and snuggling beneath his own blankets. It was what K-13 had told him to do, yet the thought never came to him to do it. Chewing a blade of grass, he stalked across the darkness straight into von Schmee's hornets' nest.

"This is the night!" he thought. "We're going to crash head on, Butcher."

He had no weapon—von Kleinhals had not been carrying a gun—but he did not want any. He rather despised any weapon smaller than a rifle or an ax. If he could not get to von Schmee unarmed, then he would grab a Mauser from some dumb-head sentry, and blaze his way in. But he was going in.

"Tonight's the night, von Schmee!" he thought.

With head bent low, with his topcoat collar turned up and half his face muffled, unarmed he strode into the hornets' nest.

HE WAS caught up in the confused gray-green streams that were pouring in and out of Oldemonde's door. Scurrying officers and men bumped blindly into him, gasped apologies with half salutes, and pushed on past without a glance. Their faces were white and strained. Already an atmosphere of confusion and terror had descended on Oldemonde, as reports began rolling in from the front. Down in the muddy bottomlands of the Laraine Keith Cothaven was hammering. How terribly he was hammering was mercifully not yet known in full. But there was enough information already in hand to mark the faces of the German staff with a terror which grew greater every moment.

"There's been a mistake! There's been a mistake! There's been a mistake!" a withered old two-star general kept whimpering to himself as he ran by.

Dick was borne in unchallenged amidst the seething, gasping turmoil. In the great flag-paved entrance hall of Oldemonde the crowd of milling Germans was greater. Squeezed shoulder to shoulder, they were stirring slowly around in packs like the movements of a heavy sea. He found himself wedged in, carried along with the confusion. For the moment he was helpless, in spite of his weight and strength. Slowly he pressed his way for-

ward in the direction of von Schmee's headquarters room.

The staring eyes of men around him seemed blind. When a free space opened they went bumping headlong into one another. Though all of them were struggling to push their way forward, it was too plain that most of them were moving no place in particular. A chalky-faced junior officer carrying a message plunged head-on into Dick, and with an almost inaudible groan collapsed immediately in a dead faint. Yet Dick knew that the youngster's popping eyes had not even focused on him. It was pure nervous exhaustion. There he lay on the floor amid the weaving, scuffling feet, and no one noticed him, no one stooped to aid him.

"There's been a mistake! There's been a mistake!" the shriveled old two-star general cried in a singsong, pushing his way back in the direction from which he had just come.

A shouting sub-lieutenant came fighting his way through the turmoil, slugging with fists and elbows at men of all ranks.

"Falkenhayn must send more troops!" he shouted. "In God's name, where is the artillery?"

There was no one to answer him. No one paid any attention to him. He fought his way viciously athwart the slowly moving currents, cursing and shouting in a hoarse voice till some officer felled him with a pistol butt.

Down in the bottomlands of Laraine Wood Keith Cothaven was hammering. Hammering, hammering . . . The massed regiments of the Invincibles were tangled in the trap.

Yet how terrible the trap would be was not yet understood completely at Oldemonde. The Invincibles themselves, huddled like cattle together in their massed ranks, surging in wave after wave over the mounting piles of their dead, blind and leaderless, slaughtered by whole companies, probably even yet did not understand the full horror of their defeat. They were the Invincibles, von Schmee's great Invincibles. They had never been defeated. They did not believe that they could die, poor cattle.

"There's been a mistake! A horrible mistake!" the ancient lunatic of a general went crying by a third time.

And now the tears were running down his face.

Two guards came pushing through the milling mass toward Dick. They were holding by the arms a kicking, writhing field officer who was yelling like a fiend.

"Give me a rifle, for Christ's sake!" he screeched. "I've got three brothers down in that Hell! Give me a rifle! I'll stop Cothaven!"

He flipped and twisted himself around like a wildcat, trying to bite the hands of the men who were pushing him along. His flesh was the color of gray clay, and saliva was drooling from his mouth.

"Crazy as a bedbug, sir," one of the guards gasped to Dick, when for a moment they were caught and held in the throng face to face. "Three brothers, sir, dead with the Brandenburg Guards. The Guards have been wiped out."

Terrible night!

IT WAS easier than he had hoped to reach von Schmee though there were three communicating rooms he must pass through from the great outer hall to reach von Schmee's inner headquarters.

He pushed his way into the headquarters suite. Discipline and watchfulness had been dumped by the board. In the confusion he was not challenged. Through the guardroom he forged, into the communications room, into von Schmee's anteroom. Radio and wired telegraph were crackling a terrific staccato. At the telephone switchboard three young soldiers with shaven heads stood rapidly plugging connections, while red call-lights sparkled over the board like fireflies. Swift as the weaving Fates their quick hands darted. *Crackle-crack-crack* flashed the blue lights of the radio, and the telegraphs clattered with the fury of a hail storm.

"Eighteen enemy night-bombers in wedge formation at 11:45 west ten miles from Mauberge!" an operator shouted. "Flying at a thousand, convoyed by combat ships, heading for Oldemonde! Orderly! Orderly! Orderly! Orderly!"

Dick pushed through into the anteroom, where the scene of the great entrance hall was repeated on a smaller scale. Von Schmee's aides, his guards and messengers, were swarming around in headless confusion. A brisk, sharp-faced brigadier general came weaving rapidly through the

throng from von Schmee's room, holding a sheaf of papers scrawled with messages high overhead. He was General Mittel, von Schmee's own personal aide. His cap was off, his coat was ripped open down his chest, and a pulse beat like a triphammer in his throat.

"The Saxons are falling back!" he panted. "Five divisions of Prussians standing fast, and the Saxon swine have knifed them! Show me a Saxon, and you've showed me the guts of a fly!"

A blond private wearing the uniform of the 17th Saxon—the only division of the Invincibles which was not Prussian—bumped his way forward. He careened against Dick's chest. His glance flashed up to Dick's collar markings. Kleinhals had been of the Saxons.

"Show me a Saxon, and you've showed me tripe!" Mittel went raving.

The Saxon private grasped Dick by the arm.

"Stop that blasted Prussian's mouth, sir, or by God I'll do it!" he choked.

Dick wrenched himself free. The infuriated soldier drove at Mittel. He swung both arms wildly at the brigadier's face. Then the two of them were the center of a wild milling turmoil. In the confusion Dick reached von Schmee's door.

The massive oaken door was opened half a foot. Through the crack he could see a portion of the great headquarters room into which he had been hustled as a prisoner twice before—the first time twenty-four hours ago almost to the dot, the second time at ten o'clock. Only two hours ago in this great room he had listened to his death sentence from von Schmee's lips.

Yet much had changed in those two hours. Much had changed with von Schmee, and much with the Invincibles. And Big Dick Fahnestock now was unguarded and unbound.

Junior officers were slipping in and out of the room continually, rushing fresh communications of disaster to the Butcher. A great yellow-bearded sergeant stood on guard at the door, struggling vainly to keep some semblance of orderliness and discipline. He sighted Dick and clicked to the salute.

"*Zu Befehl, Herr Oberst!*" he gasped. "What name for His Excellency?"

It had been Dick's intention to go as

far as he was able under the name and reputation of the man whose uniform he was wearing. But suddenly he had grown sick of pretense. He pushed himself up hard against the yellow-bearded sentry, gripping the breast pockets of his coat.

"Announce Lieutenant Richard Fahnestock of the Royal Flying Corps!" he said.

"*Zu Befehl, Herr Oberst!*" cried the sentry.

He swung the door open. Then abruptly the name which Dick had given him must have registered on his excited senses. He heeled around with a dazed look, and his hand clutched his pistol.

"Your credentials?" he said.

"This!" said Dick.

He was holding his fists on his breast, as a fighter does when he is prepared for action at close quarters. His hard right fist cracked up like a hammer. It struck the huge yellow-bearded German on the button at the end of a six-inch jolt. He faded to the floor, and didn't even know what hit him.

Dick stepped quickly through the great oak door, and closed and locked it behind him. The moonlight shone through the high barred windows. A hearthfire burned. Von Schmee was alone, except for the green-eyed Holland woman, Alys Dervanter of the *Nachrichtenamt*, who crouched on the floor at his feet.

Von Schmee had his pistol in his hand. He stood behind his desk, eyeing Dick with a burning stare.

NOW DICK was unarmed, if it can be said that a tiger with full-grown claws about to spring is unarmed. He had no gun. But he had his own two very terrible hands. Slowly and softly he crept across the floor toward the black-bearded German who stood behind the desk.

Dying logs flickered in a great marble fireplace to the left hand of von Schmee. The red shadows darted and faded across his little gleaming eyes. His pendulous abdomen moved like a bellows with his slow and profound breathing.

He did not use his gun. He had not seen Dick, though he was staring directly at him. He bent over his desk again, where his large-scale war map was spread

out. He was still manipulating pins in it. But their numbers had changed since the hour when Dick had been here before. Now the blue, orange, yellow, green, violet and black pins upon the map were fewer. Now the red pins, which had been a scant three in number, had been increased to thirty or more, each one a British regiment, sprinkled thick about the trap of Laraine Wood.

A thin scattering of latest battle front communications lay about on the map. The floor about von Schmee's desk was littered with crumpled balls of paper. Dick was close enough now to see the gray sweat on von Schmee's face, to see the working of this thick moist lips beneath the stubble of his beard.

Silently von Schmee muttered. With glazed eyes he stared at the latest reports spread out on the map before him. His stubby fingers moved about. He pulled out a violet pin, a yellow pin, two blue pins, and tossed them over his shoulder. Rapidly he thrust ten more of the fatal red pins into the map. Again he read, and moved the pins about. The whimpering woman who crouched at his feet stirred. He pushed her away with his foot. Suddenly he made a quick gesture and plucked out four black pins in one handful.

"The Brandenburg Guards, Kleinhals!" he shouted, staring up at Dick with a glassy look. "The Brandenburg Guards are wiped out!"

He uttered a hoarse sound like a sea lion's bellow that might have been a sob or a great laugh. Before his face he held in a strangling fist the four black pins, shaking them with murderous fury.

"The Brandenburg Guards, Kleinhals!" he shouted. "The dogs didn't know how to retreat, but they knew how to die! They've lost me themselves, the eternally damned swine! What good are they to me now?"

He hurled the black pins to the floor. "The Brandenburg Guards—may they rot in hell!" he shouted. "I counted on them, Kleinhals."

His glazed eyes lightened. A piercing gleam came in them. He bent across his desk, staring hard at Big Dick Fahnestock, who had crept up within ten paces.

"You are not Kleinhals," he said.

He lifted up his Luger and covered Dick

His left hand reached for a buzzer. Suddenly he burst into a roar of laughter. "You are not Kleinhals," he said. "The invincibles are not invincible. I am not God."

Dick knew then that von Schmee was a lunatic.

"I have come to find von Reuter," he said. "Don't try to block me, or what will happen to you won't be anything for the lady here to see."

Von Schmee's face was black. A look of diabolic passion came over him.

"Tell me what you have done with K-13," said Dick. "I'm here to help him, Butcher. Come out from behind your beard. Don't stand there swallowing your own spit."

Von Schmee's teeth were clicking together quickly and viciously.

"Stand back!" he said. "I am a marksman. Do not be fooled."

"If K-13 is dead," said Dick softly, "I'll bury your fat carcass beside him. If he's still alive, I'll swap you life for life. What have you done with him? Spill it, or I'll pull it out of your windpipe with these two jaws. Don't ring for help again. There's no help for you. I have about as much respect for that gun in your hand as I have for a pea-shooter."

He crouched from the knees, ready to spring, hunching his powerful shoulders forward. He measured the distance across the desk. He was quick as a flash when he tried. But there is nothing so quick as lead.

He heard a heavy knocking on the locked door behind him, but did not let it trouble him.

"Excellency! Excellency! Excellency!"

Half a dozen frightened voices were shouting beyond the door.

"*Excellenz! Herr General! General von Schmee!*"

It would take more than the yelling of all the Huns in the All Mightiest's armies to break down that thick oak door, Dick thought grimly. They'd better try dynamite or an ax, and stop their damned bellowing.

He watched von Schmee's hairy hand tightening about the Luger butt. He measured the distance and tried to estimate his own endurance. He knew that many a man has been drilled through the stomach or some other vital organ by a high-velocity steel-jacket, and has managed

to keep his feet for a long time afterward. To be sure, the clean drilling of rifle steel and the ragged smashing of pistol lead are entirely different things to stand up and meet at five paces off. Yet if a man has a fighting heart, there is a chance that he can still fight on when by all the laws of nature he should be dead.

The problem was, must the first shot necessarily drop him? If it didn't, Dick knew that von Schmee would never have time to get home another. Von Schmee knew it, too. If he could rush von Schmee head-on, and take that first smash and keep on going, perhaps he could get von Schmee before his strength failed.

There was a roaring of confused voices beyond the door. Dick slid a step forward. Von Schmee's eyelids blinked quickly, like the eye-membrane of a toad.

"Excellency!" howled the voices. "General von Schmee! An enemy bombing formation reported ten miles away, headed for Oldemonde!"

But there was no need of that belated warning now. Up on the sweep of the midnight wind, driving straight and fast across the moon-washed sky, nose-to-wing in a wild duck wedge with roaring engine heads and whistling wires, at a hundred miles an hour the great bombers had come on Oldemonde! Their dreadful shadows cut across the stars. Even while the warning was being shrieked, the loud *hroom-hroom-hroom* of their multiple Rolls motors swelled in powerful crescendo.

The organ stops of the gods had been unloosed. Now let the loud diapasons thunder.

Immediately the first crash came, landing beyond the beechwoods on the hunting lodge. Fire blazed. The thunderous vibration rolled with a clapping sound through the night. It drowned out the wild voices bellowing at von Schmee's door. It drowned out the shrieking of the woman who cowered beside von Schmee's feet. It drowned out the crack of von Schmee's Luger as he fired it pointblank at Dick Fahnestock's heart.

LIGHTS OUT! Lights out!" Some lunatic was shrieking. Shrieks and blasphemy, the sounds of sobbing and of shrill laughter, were mingled in a hideous uproar. That was the only voice which could be understood.

"Lights out! *Lights out!*"

The lights of Oldemonde continued to blaze from cellar to roof. But those roaring shadows in the sky soon would put them out.

Men were stampeding out the doors as the bombers came on over the beechwoods. They were plunging wildly through the night, racing somewhere to get away from the roaring ships that drove across the sky. The terror of death had come on Oldemonde at last. Hell was cooking for this snug secret nest of the Hun brass hats, and before the stew was thoroughly cooked it would be a dish even hotter and more terrible than that which the Prettiest Lady had cooked for the slaughtered regiments down in the Laraine.

"They got the junior officers' quarters! Direct hit! In God's name, here they come!"

The brass hats scattered like mice. They ran yelling. There were no bombproofs in Oldemonde. There was not a single Archie battery. Across the beechwoods the hunting lodge was burning up. The great iron bell began to clang above the château door, *bing-bong! bing-bong!* In answer to the swelling *hroom-hroom-hroom* of the bombers.

"In God's name, here they come! Won't somebody stop them?" a lunatic was yelling. "Won't somebody stop them, please?"

The great electric hospital torch sparkled out suddenly on the ground. The second crash from out the night blew it to Kingdom Come.

Those first two crashes were premature. They were probably twenty-pounders sent down by the little fighting ships flying high above the bombers. The bombers had not yet spoken. They had more terrible eggs to lay, and they could take their time, so as to waste not a single one. They passed northward directly over the roof ridge of Oldemonde to get the range and wind drift, and banked around on lazy sweeping wings, heading back up wind.

"Lights out! Lights out! Lights out!" the shrill voice kept yelling.

When the bombers spoke, there would be no more lights left in Oldemonde.

DICK FAHNESTOCK did not know that von Schmee had pulled the trigger. He saw the gun muzzle jerk in von Schmee's hand at the instant the first crash sounded, but that was all. He did not feel the bullet smash.

The next few minutes were obscure. He saw von Schmee staring at him for a long, long instant with dazed eyes, like a man who himself had been shot in the heart and was dying. Von Schmee backed against the wall, still holding the Luger leveled. Slowly Dick advanced, around the great carved desk of Flemish oak that separated him from the Butcher. The yellow-haired woman on the floor was uttering shriek after shriek. Horrible cries.

There sounded the second crash, out in front of the château. Nearer this time. The flash of it passed across the tall barred windows. The Butcher opened his mouth in a roar that made no sound above the thunderclap. Terror had seized him. The fierce and ruthless heart was broken in his breast.

The great bombers went roaring across the roof ridge. They did not lay their eggs this time. They were getting the wind drift. But it was as sure as dynamite that Oldemonde was doomed, and every living thing within its walls, and every stone that made it.

Backward von Schmee crept, and backward, sliding all the time toward his bed-chamber door. Backed against the door he stood, fumbling it open with his left hand behind him, while Dick moved toward him slowly and steadily.

"Are you man or devil?" said the Butcher.

Pointblank, at seven paces off, again he fired his pistol at Dick's breast. This time Dick heard the crack. But that was all. The face of the Butcher was very white. He whirled and ran like a bear across the deep rugs of his bedchamber toward the window. Dick leaped after him, but the woman on the floor wound her lean arms around his ankles. For an instant he stumbled, while she clung to him with the fury of a snake.

Before von Schmee could reach the window, a man sprang up onto the window ledge from out the night. His lithe, active form was outlined against the lopsided moon that rode low in the east. He crouched upon the window ledge, breathing quickly, naked to the waist. It was Ritter von Reuter. It was *K-13!*

"I have come, Butcher, according to my promise," he said in a clear and even voice which cost him what effort no man can see.

"to show you K-13. Now I demand the reward you offered, Butcher. I demand Oldemonde, and all that's in it!"

His head swayed in short jerks. His dark blue eyes were dilated like the eyes of a dying man. There was the scorch of a powder burn across his cheek, and his naked, sweating ribs were very much muddled and blood-smeared, and crimson drops were welling up constantly from his left shoulder. But he laughed. He was good at laughing. Upon the window ledge he crouched giddily, with his handsome face all twisted up and ghastly from exhaustion, laughing at the Butcher.

"Give me Oldemonde or not," he said, "I'll take it!"

Von Schmee fired his pistol as he ran forward. He fired again, and von Reuter rocked on the window ledge, laughing. A third time von Schmee fired. He must have been out of his mind then, for von Reuter did not topple. He ran up close. He pressed the pistol to von Reuter's blood-soaked breast, and fired it.

"God strike me dead!" he shouted, and hurled the weapon past von Reuter's head out the window.

The powder scorch marked a gray ring above von Reuter's heart. He swayed off balance, and clutched von Schmee's beard to steady himself again.

"I loaded it with blanks," he said, "before I trimmed this beard of yours, Butcher."

"God strike me dead!" von Schmee panted. "God strike me dead and let me live with my great Invincibles, for you are a devil, von Reuter, who have wrecked my life and sent to slaughter the best soldiers this world has ever seen. Would not one regiment, or ten, have been enough? Did you need to take from me the last drop of blood?"

He broke out in wrenching sobs, and huge hot tears poured down into his beard. Suddenly he seemed an old, old man, a thin and shriveled gray old man beneath the pendulous folds of his gross flesh. He cried and beat his forehead, and the brain behind the skull he thumped was the brain of a madman.

"God strike me dead!" he said. "I can carry on no more."

"Why call on God?" said von Reuter.

His sick, white face was very tired as he looked at the Butcher. There was no hate

in his eyes. There was pity. He pulled out from his waistband a small Luger, and handed it to von Schmee, muzzle end.

"There were seven in the magazine," he said. "But Abendstern stopped two, and Wolf stopped four. There is only that one remaining. I can do no more for you."

Von Schmee took the little pistol, and put it to von Reuter's ear. Steadily von Reuter looked at him, and von Reuter was smiling. Big Dick Fahnestock wrenched himself loose then from that yelling, clawing, biting female fiend upon the floor, and he had to do it in a way that wasn't very gentlemanly. Growling in his throat, he rushed like a tiger at von Schmee.

Von Reuter held him back with a gesture. Von Reuter did not flinch, though the muzzle was at his head.

"You have a better use for it, von Schmee," he said.

Then he swung his legs over the window ledge, and dropped down onto the moonlit grass. Dick vaulted out after him. They raced breathlessly away from the shadow of that great doomed pile, for the bombers, wheeling about into the wind north over the Meser, were coming back in their roaring flight for the last time.

IT WASN'T the safest place in the world to be, for bomb-sights are not so accurate as artillery. And even at a thousand feet in a clear night there was always an off chance that some excited gunner up there might release an egg a quarter-mile away from its objective. Yet as Big Dick Fahnestock grabbed the propeller of his ship to spin it, he stared up a moment at that beautiful sight within the clear night sky.

"There she goes!" whispered von Reuter. "I asked to have 'em make that sweep, to give me time to dodge before the big unloading."

"All the time in the world, all the time in the world," said Dick. "Not even a machine-gun barking up at 'em. Boy, when I get to be eighty-two, and kind of begin to lose my youthful vim and vigor, I'm going to grab me a job as a bomber."

"Get her going, big boy," said von Reuter wearily. "Let's get up and away. I'm tired, Big Dick. I'm sunk, and I'm a sick man. Damned lucky crack it was for me that blew a corner off the hunting

lodge, but I don't care to be so near again to a mess like that, big boy. My nerves aren't built that way."

"Yeah, you sure are a nervous guy," said Dick.

Hroom-hroom-hroom! came the wild duck flight, and high above, close underneath the stars, the little Fighters walked along like gnats. *Hroom-hroom-hroom!* Eighteen of them, bow-to-wing, cutting across the stars in silhouette, heading straight into the wind above the roof of Oldemonde. It was bombing practice for them. It was pie.

Big Dick had shot his Sopwith over the grass and lifted her into the air by the time the bombers cut their engines and the thunderous flashes came. Below him the world rocked, and Oldemonde went up in fire. The bombers wheeled, and spread out in a fan. And still below them the thunderous flashes dotted the black-and-silver ground, in the cedar wood, among the beeches, down by the old brick wall behind the stables where the nameless dead lay sleeping. The bombers were out to wipe the last square yard of Oldemonde from the map, to wipe the last smell of von Schmee from it. And before they had finished their work, they had nearly done it.

Up toward the stars Big Dick held his bow, climbing to meet the Fighters. High up they stood, and suddenly they dropped, one by one like birds from off a perch. Down they came, streaking through the whistling wind like bullets, Harvey and Mud-Face Mortimer, little Washee Long and Handsome Redburn and all of them. They flashed by Dick at two hundred miles an hour, cheering silently and lifting their arms in salute. Close above the ground they flattened out and hedgehopped, heaving overboard their hand grenades and twenty-pounders, opening up the Vickers racket at squads of panic-stricken fugitives. It would have been easier for many of those Hun brass hats at Oldemonde had they died fighting with the Invincibles in the trap of the Laraine.

Big Dick laid his ship over on its ear, and wheeled about in a close turn, while one by one the Fighters came up to him. The bombers were turning back. Their work was over. Dick climbed with the Fighters. Mr. Archie and Herr Fokker and Fraülein Pompom would be doing a great deal of arguing before the Fighters got safe home again. The Fighters would be glad that Big Dick Fahnestock was with them before that night was over.

THE END



BURMESE CODE

By L. G. BLOCHMAN



A Tale from the Far East of Certain Priceless Rubies and a Cobra

SEPTEMBER came to Calcutta, bringing with it the last of the hot monsoon rains, the first of the annoying clouds of green flies, and Alfred Nealy.

Nealy arrived in state on the Burma mail steamer, with two bearers and a gold headed walking stick. He bought drinks lavishly in the best oases, from Firpo's to the Grand Hotel bar, inquiring constantly for the whereabouts of one James Crispin. After a week he moved from the Great Eastern, with only one bearer, to Spence's, still seeking Crispin. By the end of the month he was living in a frowzy boarding house in Dharmtola Street, servantless, and without his gold headed cane. He was frequenting the Savoy and lesser bars now, often getting himself invited to drink with the ease of manner that bespoke extensive experience. He asked all he met if they had not come across James Crispin—a tall, rather slender, blond chap with big gray eyes and a fresh, probably large, scar on his forehead.

One day an Anglo-Indian surveyor told Nealy he knew of a man answering that

description, but that his name was Christopher James. He had recently gone to the western Bengal coal fields on some sort of a geological mission, the surveyor said. Nealy scurried after additional information, sold all his belongings except the mussy white suit he wore, bought a round trip ticket to Asansol, and left Calcutta that night.

From Asansol Nealy rode in a creaking *gharri* for two hours over bone cracking roads through blinding sunshine. On a little knoll a mile beyond the sun baked mud village of Mardipur, he saw the house that had been described to him as occupied by Christopher James. It was a glaringly white bungalow surrounded by a low, glaringly white wall. Several stiff talipot palms grew in the compound. At the gate an elderly Sikh was squatting in the dust, the corners of his square gray beard twisted into knots, a faded rag of a red turban piled on his head. His cheeks puffed out as he blew a wheedling tune on a gourd instrument, his eyes fixed on a cobra coiled in the sunlight before him, head raised, hood extended. The Sikh's right knee,

shiny and brown as it protruded from his tattered *dhoti*, moved to and fro in rhythm with his music. The cobra swayed to the same cadence.

Nealy paid his *gharri walla*, passed the snake charmer with hardly a glance, and sauntered up the path toward a veranda where a tall, rather pale man of about thirty-five sat in khaki shorts reading the *dak* edition of a Calcutta newspaper. Peering over the top of his paper, the man on the veranda caught sight of the red faced figure in a crumpled, sweat soiled duck suit approaching. A wave of color swept over his face, tinting on his high forehead a large irregular scar like the petal of a crimson rose. Nealy noticed that he wore a leather revolver holster.

"Hello, Crispin," said Nealy. "Or would you rather have me call you Christopher James?"

The man on the veranda shrugged his shoulders.

"Suit yourself," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to see you," Nealy replied. "I'm going to be your guest for a while."

"You can't stay here," said Crispin curtly.

"Yes, I can," was the glib rejoinder.

Crispin's refusal was not repeated. Nealy drew up a chair for himself, sat down at a table opposite Crispin, and tossed his grimy topee to the floor. His black hair was thick and crinkly, and had begun to gray at the temples. Perspiration was collecting in two deep furrows on his brow. He wiped it away with a frayed sleeve.

"Can't a fellow get a drink around here?" he asked.

"I suppose so," said Crispin. He raised his voice: "Narab Singh!"

The Sikh squatting by the gate looked up, still playing his gourd instrument.

"Bring another *chota peg*. This sahib is thirsty."

The Sikh removed the cover from a round, flat basket. He droned a few more notes, and the cobra glided into the basket, coiling itself. Narab Singh replaced the cover, took the basket under his arm, and went into the bungalow.

"Is that Sikh snake charmer your bearer?" inquired Nealy.

"My bearer is in the village today,"

Crispin replied. "Narab Singh is my *durwan*."

"First time I ever heard of an Indian servant doing a job that wasn't his by title," said Nealy. "Like asking a Hindu cook to wait table. It isn't done."

"Narab Singh is always doing jobs that aren't his, out of gratitude," said Crispin. "He was pretty sick a few weeks back, and I got the railway doctor up from Asansol to cure him. He says I saved his life."

"See that he isn't too saving with the Scotch," said Nealy as the Sikh reappeared with another glass, a decanter of whisky and a bottle of soda.

CRISPIN took up his newspaper again while Nealy emptied his glass without taking a breath, motioning to the Sikh to refill it.

"I see you've quit the ruby fields for the coal fields," Nealy commented, wiping his mouth.

"Obviously," said Crispin, behind his paper.

"Find the climate of Bengal is a lot healthier than the climate of Burma right now, don't you," Nealy continued.

Crispin lowered his paper and regarded his visitor in silence.

"You sure made a quick getaway from Rangoon," Nealy went on. "Disappeared even before the body was cold. I figured you got a ship out the same night. Neat work. When I found out you were in Calcutta I wanted to come over and compliment you, but I couldn't raise the cash for the trip right off. You know, Crispin, even a professional moocher can't always get his fingers on a good sized wad—without murdering somebody."

Crispin brought his hands together with a nervous movement, crumpling his newspaper.

"So you've come here to haunt me like Mott's ghost?" he asked in a tired voice. Then his words sounded a note of growing anger as he protested: "But you know I'm not a murderer, Nealy. You know I didn't kill Mott in cold blood. You were there during that crazy quarrel. You saw that Mott was the aggressor, that this scar on my forehead is his work. It was his own gun that killed him—you know that, too. It went off while I was trying to take it away from him, trying to save

myself. I was acting in self-defense. You know that. You know it, Nealy. You saw it all."

Crispin was pleading. Nealy's expression did not change. He looked at Crispin with small black eyes that were very close together. There were lines at the corners of his mouth that gave him the appearance of always smiling cynically.

"If you were in the clear," he asked, "why did you skip the country?"

Crispin's heavy eyelids dropped for a moment. There was a haunted look in his eyes when he opened them again. He lifted his hands in a listless, bewildered gesture.

"God knows," he said. "I don't know why I ran away from Burma. Panic, I guess. The sight of blood. I went to pieces. The thought of having snuffed out a life that I had shared . . . I don't know. . . ."

"You'd have a hard time explaining all that to His Majesty, the King-Emperor's cops," said Nealy. "Disappearing put you in a bad light. Practically a confession. If I was to tell anybody I know where you are——"

"Nealy," Crispin interrupted, sitting up tensely, "quit beating around the bush. Just exactly what do you want from me?"

"The rubies," replied Nealy simply.

"What rubies?"

"Mott's rubies," Nealy answered, carefully studying Crispin's face. "The rubies that started the fight. The ones you killed him for."

"They weren't Mott's rubies!" Crispin declared hotly. "They were mine. I sweated and slaved for those stones. They're all I have to show for my years in the Mogok fields. Mott had his share. He sold them in Mandalay and blew the money on the races. The rubies are all mine. You know it, Nealy——"

"That ain't all I know," Nealy cut in deliberately. "I know that Mott was killed in a little bar between Strand Road and the river, down in Rangoon. I know the man who killed him, and I know where he is now. . . ."

"You're a damned blackmailer, Nealy!" Crispin was on his feet, as pale as death. He sprang toward the smaller man, his long, slender fingers closing on the other's brick colored throat. "I could choke the life out of you. I could shake you to death,

like a cat shakes a rat; but I couldn't shake any decency into you, any sense of justice. . . ."

Nealy's ruddy face became scarlet. As Crispin tightened his grip, his beady eyes bulged. His hands clenched. Suddenly he swung one fist to the side of Crispin's jaw. The tall blond loosened his hold and staggered back, dazed. Nealy moved his head slowly from side to side and drew a deep breath.

"Don't be a damned fool, Crispin," he said, rubbing his neck. "You can't go on killing people indefinitely. Sit down and let's reason this out. You're an ungrateful son-of-a-gun. Here I am keeping your guilty secrets for you, and what reward do I get? You want to kill me. You call me blackmailer. I've been called all sorts of things: beachcomber, unprincipled loafer . . . But I live by a code of my own—a Burmese code. I've been nearly twenty years in Burma, and I've picked up some of their principles. A Burmese doesn't kill, for one thing. Neither do I. I respect the right to live, because I want to live myself. And I'm never ungrateful. Even your Sikh flunky there knows how to be grateful. You said so yourself. By the way, you might have him show his gratitude by giving us something to drink."

Crispin indicated the empty glasses. Narab Singh, who had been standing silently in the background during the altercation, stepped forward to pour whisky. There was a clink and a fizz as he pressed in the glass ball that sealed the neck of the soda bottle. He glared at Nealy as he poured the drinks.

"You want reason," said Crispin. "All right. You never earned an honest dollar in your life. I've worked hard for those rubies. You come here coolly to take them away from me as hush money. Why don't you quit being a parasite, Nealy? Why don't you work for your money?"

"There's no explaining tastes," Nealy replied. "You like to work. I don't. I enjoy living. I like to watch people, to talk to people. I like the color and the movement of the East. I like the clean, greenness of Burma. I like the gay, golden skinned Burmese girls. I like to look at it all through a pleasant alcoholic haze. I love life. So did Mott. You robbed him of it. You owe a debt to society, so to

speaking. I'm here to collect—by proxy. Let's have the rubies."

He extended his hand across the table, palm upward.

Crispin seized the hairy wrist, twisted it and pulled Nealy toward him.

"I'll be damned if I'll give them to you," he shouted. "Go ahead and blackmail me. They're my rubies. They're——"

With his free hand Nealy pushed the table sharply into the pit of Crispin's stomach. Then he snatched his arm from Crispin's grasp.

"Sorry I can't stay to hear your argument again," said Nealy, "but it bores me." He picked up his topee, then continued: "Anyhow, I have to walk to the village to pick up a ride on a bullock cart or something as far as Asansol. I want to get the night train to Calcutta. I've got business there tomorrow. The Bengal Collieries people will be interested to hear about their geologist, Christopher James. They'll be surprised when I tell 'em his name was James Crispin when he murdered a man in Rangoon."

He turned and walked down the steps.

CRISPIN drew his revolver. His finger was on the trigger. A slight pressure, and this blackmailer would be out of the way. What had he to fear, anyhow? He didn't kill Mott in cold blood. Was he going to kill Nealy in cold blood now? He felt he would be justified. But his hand trembled slightly as he thought of it. It might be an accident. An accident. . . .

"Nealy!" he called.

Nealy turned. As he saw the drawn revolver he smiled a crooked smile. He said nothing.

"Come back here!" Crispin commanded.

Nealy walked deliberately back up the path and climbed the four stairs to the veranda.

Crispin's mind toyed with an idea. An accident. . . . He had killed Mott by accident. Mott had grappled with him for the possession of a gun. If Nealy would grapple with him, and the gun should be discharged—accidentally—there would be a witness. Narab Singh was squatting in a corner, watching anxiously.

But Nealy made no effort to seize the gun. He hardly looked at the short steel barrel as he resumed his seat and took off his topee.

"Thanks for calling me," he said, his

eyes assuming his cynical smile. "If you'd have shot me in the back, I'd never have forgiven you."

He laughed mirthlessly.

Crispin still held the revolver on his unwelcome guest. It was aimed at that narrow patch of forehead between his black, bushy eyebrows. A little pressure. . . . No. It was no use. He didn't have it in him. He had killed a man, but he was not a killer. He could not shoot Nealy in cold blood. With a savage movement, as though angry with himself, he pushed his revolver quickly into the holster.

Nealy leaned back in his chair.

"Well?" he asked. "What did you call me back for?"

Crispin sat down. With a sweep of his arm he sent the two glasses crashing to the floor. He unbuttoned his shirt and felt for his money belt. Taking out a small chamois bag, he threw it toward Nealy. Narab Singh came over to pick up the bits of broken glass.

Nealy emptied the chamois bag on the palm of his hand. A dozen dull red, roughly prismatic crystals lay there. The rays of the sun, now coming horizontally onto the veranda, awoke the carmine fire beneath the smooth, unpolished facets of the stones, proclaiming them the much sought pigeon blood rubies of Upper Burma. They were as big as hazel nuts, and the fact that Crispin owned them meant they were fine specimens. They represented a fortune. Nealy smiled as he turned them over with a stubby finger. Crispin stared at him in sullen anger. Narab Singh was also looking on, but his bearded countenance betrayed no emotions.

"Thanks," said Nealy, pouring the rubies back into the little bag. "That squares your debt. On behalf of Mott and society, I thank you."

He looked about him, stood up, took out a pocket knife and walked over to a rolled curtain of split bamboo. He cut a piece of cord from one side, allowing the curtain to fall open fanwise. With the cord he made a loop from which he suspended the chamois bag, placed the loop over his head and tucked the bag into his shirt.

"You'd better start if you want to get the night train out of Asansol," said Crispin, scarcely opening his lips.

"I've just got word that my business engagement in Calcutta tomorrow has been

canceled," said Nealy lightly. "So I may as well stay the night with you. You seem to have room."

Crispin opened his mouth to protest, but thought better of it. At least he would have his rubies under his roof for a few hours more.

"All right," he said, and the lifelessness had disappeared from his manner. "The spare room opens on the veranda next to mine, but the nights are still pretty hot. I'll try to get a *chokra* to pull the punka over the bed. You won't sleep otherwise."

The sun had set. A ghost of a haze softened the outlines of the straight talipot palms that seemed to march stiffly away from the bungalow across the flat country. A wisp of smoke plumed the little mud village, now scarcely distinguishable from the plain. The mocking howl of jackals came from somewhere behind the house.

"It's an ancient Burmese custom," said Nealy, sniffing at the warm, dusty odor which rose into the twilight from the stone floor of the veranda, "that when the jackals begin to sing, it's time for the short drinks. Haven't you any gin and bitters around here?"

The preliminaries and the meal passed in silence. Nealy ate copiously of Crispin's curry, piling on great quantities of chutney and Bombay duck. He helped himself to Crispin's liqueurs and selected one of Crispin's best cigars. Then he resumed his régime of whisky and soda.

"I'll be leaving in the morning after breakfast," said Nealy, when he had increased the redness of his face by several shades. "What time do you serve *chota kazi*?"

"Six o'clock."

"Goodnight, then." He started to go, but turned back and scrutinized Crispin's face as though to read his intentions. "By the way," he added. "If you happen to change your mind about those rubies during the night, don't forget that I've told people in Calcutta that I was coming up here, and they expect me back. If I don't come, they might get inquisitive."

CRISPIN did not reply. He called for another drink and sat for a moment sipping it. He gazed vacantly at the red turban of Narab Singh, who stood before him, waiting to be dismissed for the night.

"Sahib has sold his rubies?" inquired Narab Singh.

"No."

"Sahib has given them away?"

"No, Narab Singh."

"Perhaps the sahib's friend is to sell them in the bazaar?"

"The other sahib is not a friend," said Crispin.

"He is a thief, then?"

Crispin did not reply.

"Is that all for tonight, sahib?"

"That's all."

"May the sahib sleep soundly," said Narab Singh. The Sikh did not salaam like other Indian servants. He gave a military salute and disappeared.

Crispin carried the lamp into his room, blew it out, and undressed in the dark. He lay listening to the swish of the punka over his head. The punka was composed of three long strips of matting tacked to wooden cross bars which hung from the ceiling and were made to swing back and forth by a cord running through a hole in the wall and pulled by a Hindu lad sitting outside. It stirred up tepid currents of air which barely penetrated the mosquito netting.

Distant snatches of the ironical cry of the jackals came to Crispin as he lay, sleepless and perspiring, thinking of his rubies. They were in the next room. If he did not act before morning, they would be lost forever. Lost, his years of toil in the East, years of sweating beneath a burning leech of a sun. In vain those malarial years—one long hunger for white culture, for white women. Years in which he had patiently built up his stake, the stake that was now lost unless—unless. . . .

Above the drowsy swish of the punka now came another sound; the monotonous, wheedling succession of notes with which the Sikh *durwan* dominated his cobra. Narab Singh was probably entertaining the occupants of the servant lines.

Unless—unless Alfred Nealy were to die—suddenly—before morning. If he could die by some strange Oriental disease, a disease that strikes quickly in the night and carries a man off like a chip in a swollen river current. If he could die by accident. . . .

Crispin got quietly out of bed and made his way in the dark to the chair on which he had hung his holster. He removed the

gun and fingered it. The metal was cool to his touch. The floor of imbedded bits of porcelain was cool under his bare feet.

The whining melody of Narab Singh's gourd pipes seemed nearer. An illusion, no doubt. The breeze was blowing the sound from the servant quarters.

Crispin suddenly laid the gun on the table beside his bed. The feel of the metal was unpleasant to him. He climbed back in bed.

God, it was hard to kill a man outright, even when that man was robbing you of your future. If only he would have fought, used violence in his theft, instead of calmly, maliciously insinuating the stones away . . . If some accident—some accident . . . That lazy runt of a railway doctor in Asansol would write the death certificate without difficulty. He would probably refuse to leave his punka and his constant brandy peg for a hot, dusty ride to see an unknown corpse. Like as not he would listen to any verbal explanation and then write the certificate . . . "An accident, doctor. The unfortunate man was visiting me. . . ."

That damned wheedling tune of the snake charmer was getting on his nerves. His mind fitted words to the monotonous repetition of four notes. An accident—an accident—an accident . . . The tune was louder now, and it wasn't the breeze. The piping came from a corner of the veranda, almost under the two bedroom windows. What the hell was that Sikh doing around in front of the bungalow?

"An accident . . . An accident, doctor . . . He was cleaning a gun when suddenly. . . ."

The piping of the snake charmer stopped on a wailing note that died away like the deflation of a toy rubber duck that children blow full of air. It didn't begin again. The punka swished back and forth in the darkness.

In the next room Nealy's punka creaked slightly. Crispin strained his ears to listen to it. Nealy's punka. Nealy, who had stolen his future . . . Crispin heard a faint, even rustle, as though something were moving over the smooth, crazy china floor. Nealy's bed springs gave forth a metallic murmur. A match scratched on the wall.

Then a long, shrill cry filled the night; a high pitched inhuman scream that was yet human in its terrible hopelessness. It came

shrieking from the depths of dread and died in the silence of despair.

Crispin sat up, his heart beating wildly. Instinctively he tore aside the mosquito bar and sprang from bed. Seizing his revolver he rushed into Nealy's room. Two steps inside the door he stopped short. The hair on the back of his neck crawled.

A LAMP burning beside the bed illuminated the scene with a yellow glow. Through the transparency of the tentlike mosquito net Crispin saw Nealy, cowering against the head of the bed, his white lips parted in terror, his fear widened eyes staring in front of him. There, head raised and hood distended, was coiled a cobra.

The deadly serpent's uplifted head stood rigid a foot above the center of the bed. The yellow segments on the under side of the hood glistened as though varnished.

A move on the part of either man and the ugly head would shoot forward with the speed of a high tension spring. Alfred Nealy would suffer for perhaps an hour, lose consciousness, and all would be over. Alfred Nealy would die of snakebite—by accident. Nealy, the blackmailer, would perish logically and conveniently, leaving the rubies behind him. But Nealy, the man, would suffer. His agony had already begun. As he crouched in his corner, his face distorted, his right hand clutching a fold in the mosquito bar, he was at once a broken old man and a helpless child. Looking at him, Crispin saw not an enemy but a man in distress. The human being obscured the rubies.

The upraised head of the cobra began to vibrate through a short, nervous arc.

Crispin thrust the muzzle of his revolver against the mosquito netting and pulled the trigger.

There was an explosion. Through a cloud of acrid smelling smoke Crispin saw a headless serpent writhing on the bed. Nealy watched it, still fascinated. Gradually his features relaxed. His expression of terror became one of stupid surprise. He was speechless.

For a full minute Crispin regarded the tail of the dead cobra lashing about futilely.

"Narab Singh!" he called.

The Sikh appeared almost instantly, too soon for him to have come from the servant

lines. He took in the scene with a bewildered glance.

"Sahib?"

"Run to the village and get a *tonga*," Crispin directed. "This sahib wants to leave for Asansol immediately."

Narab Singh hesitated. There was a bulge under his tunic as though a gourd pipe was concealed there.

"*Achchah*, sahib," he said after a short pause.

"I—I wonder," said Nealy, his voice faltering, "if he could pour us a drink before he goes. I—I'm just a bit upset."

He crawled off the bed, giving a last glance at the cobra still squirming in death. Regaining his composure, he put his hand into his shirt.

"There's an old Burmese custom," he said, "which is against a man paying the same debt twice. I believe it. It's one of the few things I do believe." Nealy tried to speak with his usual bravado, but his effort lacked conviction. He went on: "You've squared yourself with society twice tonight, Crispin, and its representative, Alfred T. Nealy, never having been called ungrateful although he's been called a lot of other things, has the honor of refunding your first payment."

He drew the chamois bag from his

bosom and placed it in Crispin's hand.

He drank his *chota peg* in silence. When the *tonga* rattled up to the compound twenty minutes later, he arose without a word. He hesitated a moment, as though trying to decide whether or not to shake hands. As Crispin made no overture, he walked down the path and climbed into the waiting vehicle. The light from a smoky lantern, hanging from the four posted superstructure of the *tonga*, shone for a moment on his face, and Crispin noticed that his perpetual cynical smile was gone.

The *tonga* rolled down the Asansol road to the accompaniment of creaking wheels and the shouts of the Bengali driver.

"Narab Singh!" called Crispin.

The Sikh *durwan* walked slowly to the veranda.

"Sahib?"

"Can you get another cobra in the bazaar, Narab Singh?"

"Perhaps, sahib."

"How much will it cost?"

"Perhaps fifty rupees, sahib—for a small one."

Crispin unfolded his wallet and took out a bank note.

"Here's a hundred rupees, Narab Singh," he said. "Get a big one."





Chester

MILD *enough for anybody*

What a cigarette meant *there*

20 degrees below,
and no tobacco, through lonely weeks of
glittering silence. Then a speck on the
hard, bright horizon; another musher,
outward-bound . . . and *cigarettes!* What
price cold or Arctic hardship then!

What a cigarette means *here*

220 degrees above,
as endless belts carry the choice tobacco for
Chesterfield inch by inch through the great
steel ovens.

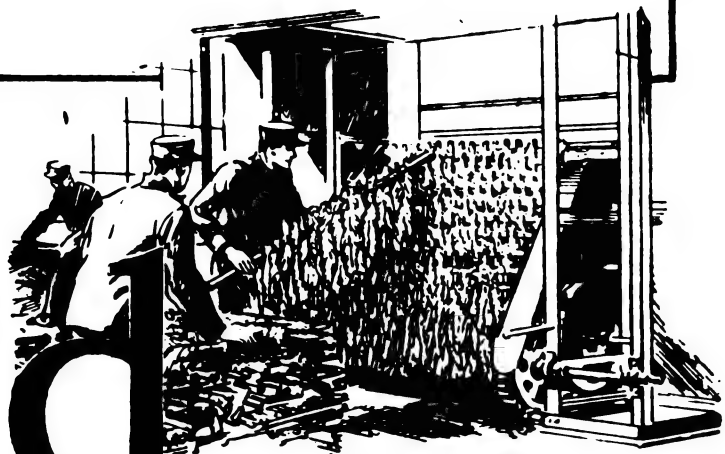
Here, in penetrating heat, science corrects
and perfects the curing commenced in the
farmer's barn. Dried, then cooled, then steamed
to exact and uniform heat and moisture, the
tobacco is ready for the final mellowing—two
long years ageing in wood—that only Nature
can give.

Man, Science, Nature—all work together on
Chesterfield. And in the bland, satisfying
smoothness of Chesterfield itself is ample proof
that their patient, costly team-work is good!

Liggett & Myers Tobacco Co.

field

..... and yet **THEY SATISFY**



*Through long steam-heated ovens, new
tobacco passes in slow endless proces-
sion for drying and "conditioning."*

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

*Where writers, readers and the editor gather
for informal discussion*

THE HALLMARKS OF MANHOOD

RECENTLY I had dinner with a writer who served as a personnel officer in France in the late war. We spoke of courage, which is the very first article in a fighting man's stock in trade. I asked him if experience had taught him any means of infallibly judging the potential nerve of a man. He smiled, and said that experience had taught him only to disregard every notion he had ever held about character and its outward signs.

He described two cases which came under his notice in the Army. One was that of an infantry officer, a big-shouldered brute of a man with a set of jaw and hardness of eye that bred instant respect for him everywhere. He was a magnificent specimen of warrior; born and bred, one would say, to the profession of arms. He was at once the pride and dread of his men. And when his regiment went into action he cracked wide open at the first breath of danger, so that he had to be removed from his command on the spot and sent to the rear under escort.

The second case was that of a lieutenant of infantry who was a wisp of a creature compared to the great fellows in the ranks of his platoon. He was so unimpressive, in fact, that he was not permitted to accompany his outfit into battle, but was sent back, when his regiment entered the lines, to fill some quiet post in the Service of Supply. He objected so heatedly and at such length that official notice was taken

of his complaint. He insisted on being put back with troops, and begged that it be done immediately. He was informed by a skeptical reclassification officer that only one job was open at the moment. Chemical Warfare had called for a replacement. And in that branch of the service casualties had been the highest in the Army; close to one hundred per cent. Our young firebrand was so informed—and his reply was a request that orders be made out right away so that he could get on the job before some other aspirant beat him to it. He obeyed his orders, and in no time was on his way to the front, grimly satisfied.

These were exceptional cases, my informant explained, but they served to illustrate the point that courage is an intangible, elusive quality that knows no rules. It breaks out in the most unexpected places, and is astonishingly absent where its presence has been taken for granted.

Like virgin gold, one may conclude, courage is where you find it.

THE ESSENCE OF ADVENTURE

THE serial which concludes in this issue has been one of the most successful stories we've ever published. I was delighted months ago when I first read the manuscript, and many, many readers have made evident their pleasure since. The author recently put into words some of his reasons for writing the story, and though he intended them for my eyes alone, they are too good to keep. He says in the course of his letter:

As a first essay in war story writing, this piece taught me, surprisingly, that it is a genre in which I have keen interest. Perhaps because I have strong pugnacious instincts, and am sprung from men who've fought all the wars since the above mentioned Mug-Wump beat his oaken club on the ground and bellowed fury into his bosom as preparation for going out and socking a few Neanderthal men over the dome. But, more probably, I think the war story interests me because in it alone we may still represent the movement of majestic forces. The sciences, from chemistry to psychology, have deprived us of many simple narrative themes, substituting complex motivations. A Romeo stabbing himself through the pulmonary for his Juliet is merely grotesque to a generation which approaches the itch called Love after a reading of Stekel and Freud. An Odysseus wandering ten years through the little Mediterranean is only a bug in a washtub. All the Indians now wear shoes, and the only slightly picturesque cowboys are those who read the Western magazines and try to emulate the six-gun demons born from the brain of some typewriter pounder living in Hackensack, New Jersey. There is no more adventure in the sea than on the Lincoln highway in a Ford coupé. If men feel terrific internal upheavals nowadays, they don't take a shining sword and go out to battle Zeus—they swallow dyspepsia tablets. If somebody gets your girl, you can get somebody else's girl. If you find yourself alone in a Siamese jungle with a man-eating tiger ready to spring on you, you think what a damned fool you are for ever being there in the first place. As no doubt you are. So the old simple strong themes of the story are being strangled by sophistication and scientific analysis. Love adventure, the sea—you can reduce 'em all to a chemical equation. But not war. *There* is one human adventure wherein the Fates still move, wherein the old gods may struggle against each other with sinews that shake a world, wherein masses of men, battling to death for titanic and inscrutable accomplishments, may inspire us with a belief that human living is still tremendous—that there is in it something more than a net of subconscious complexes, more than endocrinological stimuli and mechanistic laws, more than death, even.

Joel Rogers

THE NOT QUITE DEADLY PARALLEL

HERE are a couple of letters which arrived in the office practically together. I enjoyed them—though, you will realize, in different ways. Since each answers the other so well, I shall step aside and refrain from spoiling the fun by any further comment of my own.

I have been a reader of EVERYBODY's for a long time, beginning back in the Tom Lawson days more than twenty years ago. It seems only proper, therefore, that I should make known to you my resolution for the next twenty. This is to announce that I shall not attempt again to find anything interesting or instructive in a publication

so trivial and time wasting as yours has become.

I will be fair, and grant that you have barred from your pages the trashy sex exploitation which some other magazines seem to rely on. But until you give your readers something more than stories which constantly glorify violence and gun play, I must decline to read your publication further.

Arthur Apperson Grant

A bit breathless after that hell-and-brimstone blast, I came upon the following missive:

Will somebody please tell me how long this has been going on? I mean this EVERYBODY's magazine. A couple of months back I found myself in Union Station, Chicago, with a couple of hours between trains, and a copy of EVERYBODY's on a stand looked like it was worth investigating. I took it along—and I almost missed my train!

I travel a great deal and see a lot of country, and my business (which is legitimate but, well, unconventional) brings me in contact with all kinds of men. Chiefly they are the men who are the backbone of the country, the men who get things done. I know them, I like to talk to them, and they are the kind of guys I like to read about. They are the kind of guys Kipling and Jack London wrote about, for instance. They are like this Big Dick in Joel Roger's *K-13*, which I've just started. That's a real story, brother!

Anyway, there's an awful lot of junk being printed in this world. I've got a grudge against the sort of he man who kills off a gang of bandits before breakfast each morning, and another grudge against the kind who seem to do nothing but pass wisecracks with a lot of tea party women all through a story. I've been meeting the kind I like in EVERYBODY's, and I thought you'd be interested to hear how a brand new reader takes to your magazine.

Charles Macklin

CREDO

WHILE we're about it, I might as well pass along a statement recently prepared to make clear the policy of this magazine for the guidance of those in doubt. Our platform is this, and nothing more:

EVERYBODY's is a magazine aimed at adult-minded readers of every age. It is a magazine of entertainment exclusively. It is proceeding on the theory that any story which can catch and hold the interest of a reader will inevitably have some form of conflict implicit in its plot. It is this conflict which interests us, even more than ultimate achievement; and we hold that the elemental warfare of the pioneer against his raw, reluctant acres is equally worthy of attention with the determined efforts of

an ambitious young male to eliminate competition and win at once his mate and a place in the world worthy of her. Sex interest alone is not wanted, nor is the purely economic urge of the so-called business story. Color and the rewards of struggle are perhaps most frequently to be found in the far places of the world; this may account for the popularity of the exotic in our fiction backgrounds. However, we welcome any story which enlists the sympathy of the reader in the cause of a convincing, appealing character anywhere engaged in accomplishing the chief object of his desire. Nine times out of ten he will have a good time doing it—and so too will the reader.

WHEN DOCTORS DISAGREE

A MOST competent critic rises to call attention to a detail he regards as erroneous in a story by L. G. BLOCHMAN. The matter being one for specialists, I leave the floor to the plaintiff and defendant.

In the July issue of EVERYBODY'S there was a story by L. G. BLOCHMAN, *The Whistling Pigeons of Peking*.

Being a soldier in the 15th Infantry and knowing a little about the country around Peking, I was naturally interested in this story, as it concerned both. I really enjoyed the story, but I want to call attention to a slight mistake on the part of the author.

Mr. Blochman should remember that there is more than one language used in China before he has his characters speak Chinese. General Joe Thompson, who had soldiered around Tientsin and Peking, would not have been speaking Cantonese to his house boy. When he called the boy and said make it *chop-chop* he must have thought he was in Shanghai or Canton, for *chop-chop* means quick or fast, or as an American might say, "make it snappy," in the Cantonese or Southern languages. But it wouldn't mean near as much to a Chinaman around Peking as "make it snappy" itself would, for there is more English spoken there than Cantonese.

In and around Peking the Mandarin language is used. In fact all of China that is north of the Yellow River uses Mandarin or dialects of it. South of the river the Cantonese is used. Both languages are written alike, but there is no likeness at all in the spoken language. Cantonese is commonly called "singsong" and the kind you mostly hear around chop suey joints in the States. The word *chop-chop* is translated *qui-qui* or *qui-qui-de* in the Mandarin.

I'll say one thing about Mr. Blochman though—he sure knows Peking otherwise. He must have been there for a little while, anyway.

I also enjoyed Mr. Nicholson's story of Siberia,

The Gray Wolves. I, too, know that it isn't all ice and snow up there. I was not there with the expedition, but I have been since. It does get pretty cold at that.

Corporal Terrell C. Holliday

Here follows the author's reply to Corporal Holliday:

Of course, *chop-chop* isn't Mandarin, but then General Joe Thompson doesn't speak much Mandarin. When he talks to Henry Pu Ting he speaks a mixture of English and Treaty Port jargon—which Henry understands, having been comrade for a tobacco firm in Shanghai and Tientsin. Now, as you know, Treaty Port jargon contains words and corruptions from every language from Portuguese to Hindustani, to say nothing of most Chinese dialects. That's why a word like *chop-chop* is often spoken, even though incorrectly, far from its home. I've heard it used instead of *hayaku* even in Japanese ports—much to the disgust of the old residents, naturally.

Next time you're down in the Japanese Concession, Corporal, you might have a mug of Asahi beer for me.

L. G. Blochman

IN WRITING me later, Blochman had some criticism of his own to make. The pun in question was quite undeliberately perpetrated—and to the best of my knowledge went completely unnoticed.

By the way, whatever copy reader, proof reader, or compositor changed the Chao Men gate to Chao Mein gate in *The Whistling Pigeons of Peking* pulled a brodie, doubtless under the influence of some Mott Street menu card. *Men* is the arbitrary but accepted transliteration, the ideograph meaning door. It is pronounced *mun* in Mandarin and other northern dialects, *moon* in Cantonese and the southern dialects, but never, to the best of my knowledge, *mein*, which has a long "a" sound.

The subject of the varied sources and corruptions which go to make up the language of the Chinese Treaty Ports is intensely interesting to me. *Joss*, which is familiar to us, apparently comes from the Portuguese *deos*—God. *Chi*, meaning anything written, from a bill to a love letter, comes from the Hindustani *chitti*, while *pidgin* is supposed to be a corruption of the English "business."

Blochman

OLD-TIMERS

HERE rises one to defend the Western story. I appreciate this reader's interest in OSCAR JENSEN's recent tale, and wish only to say that I bought it not because it was a Western but because it looked to me like a good yarn, however considered.

I was very much interested in a story in your last issue, *Montana Man*, by Jensen.

After a day of squabbling with people in my office I crave entertainment of a sort that will entirely take my mind off affairs of the day. Occasionally I find a story which will hold my interest from beginning to end so that when it is finished I cannot remember that my mind has once wandered from the story for an instant and glanced a vision of the day's affairs. That is really my test for a good story, but it seems that during the past ten years such stories are becoming rare.

Possibly it is because my training has been all Western, mostly out of doors (rather, out of doors when possible) and I am not particularly interested in mushy love affairs or business intrigue, with which, it appears, the modern short story writer mostly deals. In other words, I might say, in my opinion the red corpuscles are missing.

What is the reason you do not publish more Western stories? Has the public demand for such tales fallen off?

The old Westerner has sharp contrasts. A few of them are still left out here who would make wonderful material for a skilful writer. When he was honorable he was the soul of honor and squareness; when he was "bad" he was bad clear through, yet usually had elements of squareness in him that still called for admiration of his character. These elements seem to have been lost sight of by modern writers.

It appears from the character drawn by Mr. Jensen of his "old man", that he is surely acquainted with a cowman whom I personally knew and admired very much in Old Mexico many years ago. If not he is of the same type.

Jay Sigworth

SHOP TALK

WITH this issue we present to you a fairly complete job of transformation. We feel very pleased with the result of these minor upheavals. From now on the magazine will follow the present pattern as closely as possible—and the final judgment is in your hands . . . The coming of GEORGES SURDEZ to EVERYBODY'S is an event many of you will hail with enthusiasm, I know. Your letters in the past urging me to induce him to give us stories, persuade me to believe so. No one today is writing with greater vividness and drama of barbaric North Africa. He will have a

story in these pages next month, too, one of intense emotion most curiously told . . . The feature novelette in the March issue has an interesting story behind it. *Periscope!* is the tale of an American gun crew on a North Atlantic merchantman in 1918. Their exploit in capturing a U-Boat after being taken aboard as prisoners, and running the terrible gauntlet of Allied and German sea forces alike, is founded on one of the most incredible episodes of the war. The feat actually was performed, and I have heard a modest account of the affair from the lips of the very man who led the reckless mutineers through that heroic adventure. L. MURNEY MINTZER, author of the story, is one who not only can write, but who possesses in addition an authoritative knowledge of warcraft from his career in the Navy . . . The next issue is also distinguished by the appearance of *Child of the Sun*, a new serial by DANE COOLIDGE. This story is an epic of accomplishment, the tale of the first white man to penetrate to the seat of a savage and noble empire far in the mountain fastness of Yucatan. Behind the events in this romance lies one of the most fascinating of all legends—that of the Sun God, Quetzalcoatl, who is traditionally supposed to have come to his people from over the sea on the path of the rising sun, and subsequently, after endowing them with a new culture and religion, to have departed the same way. It is accepted by historians that this continent was visited by Europeans long before Columbus, and it seems very probable that some wandering missionary or explorer touched the shores of Mexico centuries ago, to dazzle the simple Indians with his fair skin and superior knowledge, and to create a divine legend. What an exploit! What a supreme adventurer he was, this unknown who became a god! It is a matter of profound regret that he left us no story of his travels, for such a narrative would have been the greatest adventure story ever told.

WILLIAM CORCORAN



PERISCOPE!

By L. MURNEY MINTZER

The annals of the Great War offer no more thrilling story than this saga of the gun crew of a torpedoed American merchantman, who, taken aboard a German submarine as prisoners, fought their way against tremendous odds to freedom.

KHILIT

By MURRAY LEINSTER

A strange, exotic tale of a white renegade in the wild jungleland of Malaysia.

CHILD OF THE SUN

By DANE COOLIDGE

Beginning a splendid new serial of Yucatan, where, behind impenetrable mountains, a lost Aztec empire defied the world.



And eight short stories—including "Turnstile," by Georges Surdez, a stirring tale of the French Foreign Legion; "Nine Winter, Three Fog," by Millard Ward, the story of a mate's sheer courage in the graveyard of the wintry North Atlantic; "In the Manner of Lipstick," by Edgar Wallace, a short, deftly told yarn of white diplomacy in the African jungle; and "Calamity Kate," by Barry Lyndon, another thrilling episode of the reckless racing drivers.